A Bride Crowned in Water

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A Bride Crowned in Water

by willowoftheriver

Summary

Will's empathy isn't scientifically explainable. Too bad she didn't know that before she came to Mount Hikami.

The Immortal Flower has withered. Now there must be another.

Notes

I have to explain all my batshit fanfics recently:

I bought a Wii U specifically to play Fatal Frame V, and since there literally aren't any other exclusive games on the console that I'm interested in, I've nicknamed FFV 'the $400 game'. Therefore I've tried to wring everything out of it that I can, now including a fanfic.

When the 'glancing' ability came up in-game all I could think about was that they would consider Will Graham a freaking powerful Shrine Maiden because he can already basically do that without any training. And so . . . this was born.

Female!Will is back again from my GoT-fusion fic because I couldn't figure out how to make things work with normal Will, given the extremely strict gender roles present on Mt. Hikami. At least the genderbending's actually really fun to write. :)

one more soul to the call

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Doctor Lecter's coming, too?" Beverly asks, not unkindly, the instant her foot hits the interior of the plane.

"Doctor Lecter speaks Japanese," booms Jack. "Fluently."

"Nice. Where'd you learn?" she asks, pulling the strap of her bag up off her shoulder. She puts it in the overhead compartment as Lecter explains patiently that his aunt-by-marriage had been Japanese, with a full staff of Japanese servants in her employ, so picking it up hadn't been difficult.

Will shifts in her seat and pops three aspirin in her mouth, chewing them into a bitter grit. There's already a sour taste in her mouth, because this case is enough of a joke even without the gaping language barrier. Jack couldn't give any less of a damn about it—he'd leave claw marks on the tarmac if he could, because *the Ripper, the Ripper, the Ripper.* He's dreading that powerlessness he'll feel when he's on the other side of the world, with the Ripper all alone in Baltimore. (She doesn't think so much of it as a city anymore—it's an amusement park, a playground, a hunting reserve, a killing field.) If only he realized that he's *always* just as powerless, wherever he is. They're not anywhere near catching him, and an interim case isn't going to make a difference.

"—hner's team gets to use a private jet all the time," Price is saying from the other side of the aisle, an exaggerated, almost childlike whining to his voice. "They took it to *New York* last month! That's only four hours by car! And yet all we hear is about budget cuts! They—"

The pilot interrupts over the intercom, asking them to please buckle their seatbelts and turn off their electronics and prepare for takeoff. Jack is the last to comply, all anxious, angry energy as he grudgingly straps himself in.

They've only been in the air a few minutes when he undoes it and stands up, clapping his hands. Price frowns at being interrupted again.

"It's time to focus, people," he announces. "Facts of the case, go."

Beverly begins: "Lavinia Gutierrez, fifteen, an American citizen. Attends St. Francis's International School, where according to classmates, she and the other three missing kids were dared to sneak out at night and go up Mount Hikami, near the next town over. Right of passage crap. That was five days ago. Search parties were out within ten hours, but there hasn't been a trace."

"Mount Hikami is best known as a suicide hotspot," says Lecter. "Second only to Aokigahara Forest at the base of Mount Fuji."

“And rumored to be haunted, of course.” Beverly grins. “I googled it before we left and does it have it all. Legends about murdered shrine maidens, construction workers dropping like flies when they tried to develop a resort there in the ‘90s, a female Japanese Slender Man—”

“So maybe they went up there and interrupted some nutcase trying to kill himself,” Zeller cuts in, shooting her a look. “He’s unbalanced as it is, decides to take them with him—”

Will gives a pained snort. “You don’t go up a mountain, away from anyone you could possibly inconvenience with your death, and then suddenly decide you’re worth taking somebody else down with you.”

Zeller opens his mouth, but Price’s voice comes first. “Occam’s Razor. The terrain would be difficult enough for an experienced hiker. Four kids, the oldest fifteen, in the middle of the night? They probably got lost, panicked, got further and further from the trail. Terminal burrowing would explain why the bodies aren’t turning up.”

Or they’re still alive. Still panicked, more with each second. Hungry and running and breathing in the smell of wet dirt and dead leaves as the trees seem to tear at them like living things.

“Or, maybe there’s an obvious one: it *is* a suicide hotspot. It wouldn’t be the first time students made a pact.” Beverly shrugs.

That’s not what Lavinia’s father wants to hear, obviously. Every other word out of his mouth is *abduction*, and while taking four children at one time wouldn’t be entirely unprecedented, it’s *unlikely*.

It if were Will, Will’s *child*—and isn’t that uncomfortable, the thought of her having a child, of a child *being* hers—she thinks she would rather it be suicide, that they laid themselves down in a pond and let it all slip away. Her imagination calls things up too vividly to want the alternative. It seems almost *selfish*, wishing whatever torment on them if only just so they can see them again at the end of it, but then again, Will’s never met a missing person’s family member who didn’t want exactly that.

Lavinia’s father is the CEO of a major corporation, so the FBI is being particularly accommodating. She’s his only child from his first marriage, a pretty girl that stares out from her last school photo with brown eyes.

Family problems? Oh, Will can read those in every line of her face. The others’, too—Lisa Nakamura, the fourteen year old, and then the cousins, Shinji Kagura and little Mitsuko Akabane.

Why would they take her with them? *Why wouldn’t they? I’m nine years old and just as grown up as cousin. I’m closer to him than most of my family because of school, and I’m not afraid of haunted mountains. And I’m too young to truly understand the concept of* suicide.

“Will?” Jack demands. “Thoughts?”

The mountain's reputation draws me. Deaths layered upon deaths and rumors of the paranormal have brought me here. Then I see them, alone, wandering, and I—but why would I—?

I am a pedophile. Two girls and the boy are a touch too old but the youngest girl, now her*—but I have to get rid of the other three. I establish control with a—no gun, no, this is Japan, and why am I here to start with—?*

I am a hunter. I accidentally shoot what I think is a deer, and then the other three become witnesses, but no, no, there aren't game animals on Hikami—

We are unhappy at home and so we decide to die together. A quiet death amidst beauty and nature is more appealing than slitting wrists in a bathtub or taking pills and lying down in a bed, and so we go. We take the girl with us because—because—

"It's too early to draw any conclusions, Jack," she says, sliding her glasses off and pinching the bridge of her nose. She can work them, but missing persons cases aren't her forte—it's harder to get something from nothing. (Except those rare times when it isn't, when absence can speak more loudly than action. This is not one of those times.)

Jack looks ready to fight her on it, but gives up at the last instant. Doctor Lecter spares her a glance, waiting until he turns his attention away.

"The youngest girl," he says quietly.

"She seems to invalidate the suicide theory, if not entirely. And she's an . . . *outlier* in most of the others." She runs her hand down her face, pausing to press on her eyes. They feel swollen behind her lids. "Them getting lost makes more sense than any kind of foul play. If they just all stay put in one place, they might even be found alive."

"The type of conclusion we can only hope for."

She laughs darkly, tiredly. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't hold my breath." Not that she thinks he is.

She blindly shuts the file in her lap so Lavinia can't stare at her and lets her head fall back onto the rest. It's an overnight flight, and when they arrive they'll be fourteen hours ahead of their time, in for a long, overstretched day.

The sound of Beverly, Price, and Zeller's chatter becomes almost soothing after a while, when she stops hearing their actual words and is left with the thrum of their voices.

Then she's running. Water sloshes up past her hips, pushing against every step. Her toes sink into silt.

She smells sweetness, flowers and freshwater waves and decaying bodies melting away one cell at a time, skin and blood and tissue washed off of pure white bones until they erode to marrow.

The water is smooth and unbroken, black glass beneath a burnt sky, and she doesn't have to hesitate, doesn't have to look back through her sodden hair. He's chosen, so he follows. He'll

always follow.

She doesn't fall, even though it seems like she does. The water just gets *deeper*, all of a sudden. And as it rushes up to meet her, finally she turns, fingers closing around an antler, thumb running over velvet.

The water takes her, and she takes him.

"Will," Lecter says, and she doesn't jolt awake. It's more of a quiet, disorientated return, her hand out and clutching his wrist before she knows what she's doing. Then she realizes her head is on his shoulder and she jerks up straight in her seat, looking fixedly forward at the back of Jack's head.

"We're almost there," Lecter tells her mildly.

"I was asleep for . . .?"

"Over twelve hours. I was becoming concerned."

"I guess I just needed it." She runs an anxious hand through her hair, tugging roughly through the little knots when they snag her fingers. She turns to look out the window as an excuse not to talk, because she doesn't even want to know what subject he would bring up with her first.

The little town at the base of the mountain with a name that she still can't pronounce entirely right doesn't have an airport, so they'll be landing in the city where the kids attended school. Their altitude seems lower than it was, but she can't make out any civilization. They're above a forest, thousands of tiny black treetops with no lights in between.

She shuts her eyes again, resting her forehead against the glass, and lets her body move with the plane, like a slow glide over a still, black lake.

Chapter End Notes

I think I saw on the Blacklist or somewhere that when an American citizen goes missing overseas it's the FBI's problem. So I just kind of ran with it.

I hate creating original characters in fanfics. I named them, for the most part, after characters from other horror games. And a horror story, for 'Lavinia'.

Oh, and Price's bitching is a reference to Criminal Minds, because I think they'd fly that jet to a case ten miles away if they could.

I had no idea what to name this thing. I suck at titles so much. And the chapter title is from the Silent Hill Homecoming song.

-Anna

i think there's a fault in my code

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

During the landing, Beverly somehow managed to cajole Doctor Lecter into talking about the time he spent in Japan learning how to properly cook pufferfish from an Okinawan chef.

“I would be glad to have you for dinner when we return to the States,” he offers as they retrieve their bags from the overhead compartments and start towards the exit.

“Can I try the liver? They say it’s the tastiest part.”

“As well as one of the most poisonous.”

Beverly smiles widely. “What can I say? Sometimes I like to live dangerously. Hey, what about you, Will? You like fish.”

Will rubs her temple, shrugging the strap of her bag onto her shoulder. The aspirin have worn off. “I’ll pass.”

They descend onto the tarmac slowly, wincing at the midday sun. She’s sure they’ll make a great impression, all of them looking wan and frayed at the ends—except for Doctor Lecter, of course. She’s not sure that he sleeps. She saw him once in a housecoat, making coffee the first thing in the morning, but even though his hair was down, not a single strand had been out of place. His energy glides along steadily from one reserve to the next, never failing him.

The two police officers awaiting them greet them with respectful bows, though the woman’s is more poised than the man’s. Will feels his fear bloom in her mind like a cloud of ink spreading on a page—not nervousness, not misapprehension at working with another agency, but a cold, sweating dread that twists the shadows in the corner of his eyes.

Lilting foreign words slip off of Lecter’s tongue. (Will likes the rhythm of them.)

The woman smiles, polite and businesslike, at whatever he said, and motions them to the van. Will takes a seat by the window, hands folded in her lap, half listening as Lecter continues talking with her. Outside is the world that once belonged to the kids—the sights they saw every day, the paths they walked, the offices they passed, the shops they frequented. Their unconscious minds knew the cracks in the pavement and the words on the signs and the faces that passed each day with dogs at the end of leashes.

In a little while, Will is going to start worrying about her own dogs, about whether or not Alana understood all her instructions and if she’s entirely capable of handling seven of them at one time—but right now, *I don’t have any dogs. I’d like to, but school in Japan is exhausting like nothing I’ve ever known. I miss Europe. My father says that this is my country just as much as it is his, but I’ve always taken more after my mother. I miss the food and the*

architecture and the language, because while my Japanese is functional enough when I speak, kanji can just be so frustrating.

"Officer Kobayashi says that local law enforcement has suspected for some time that there might be a serial killer active in the area," says Lecter. "Young women have been going missing with alarming frequency. Though there have never been any bodies recovered."

I'm not concerned with serial killers. No fourteen year olds are, really. What does concern me are grades. My mother's drinking. The fact that I'm three inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than the majority of my female classmates. I'll never really belong here.

Lecter makes a very small, incredulous sound in the back of his throat and repeats a word. "Kamikakushi?"

Officer Kajiro nods solemnly. Kobayashi hisses an angry string of words at him.

"What is it?" Jack demands.

"Apparently there is a widespread belief around the mountain that if the missing girls didn't commit suicide, then they were . . . *spirited away*." Lecter seems amused, almost cruelly so.

"That was a great movie," Jimmy pipes up.

Jack talks over him. "You mean taken by, what? Demons? Ghosts? Surely the authorities don't put any stock in that."

"I would say that the one-time presence of a shrine on the mountain, coupled with its history of suicide and its remote location, are a perfect combination for those sort of deeply ingrained local superstitions."

"And the perfect thing for a serial killer to take advantage of," Beverly adds. "Oh, they weren't killed—they were taken by supernatural forces. No one'll look for them because they're too scared, and no one'll think he even exists."

I have picked the mountain because of its history, because of the persistent rumors and folklore surrounding it. They all think I'm a ghost, and in a way, I am. Lurking in darkness under the cover of trees, unknown to all. I don't want recognition in the media.

I don't lure. I couldn't, because that puts me in sight. Somewhere, somehow, I've learned patience. Am I older, to have such a good grasp on my impulses? To sit and wait?

But for who? Killing someone who wants to die—what power is there in that? What gratification, taking away something they don't even want? Is it what I do to them beforehand? And the bodies—what do I do with them? Burn them? Eat them?

No. Not eat. That's a different sort of monster, hovering just out of sight. But consuming and eating are two separate things.

The van jumps, rattling over uneven road. The city had cut off abruptly a while back, becoming wide expanses of jagged, grassy hills that eventually give way to the old,

traditionally Japanese buildings that form the town. They're all neatly maintained, sitting there almost perfect in a strange, heavy stillness. There are no people on the sidewalks, no faces in the windows or birds sitting on the electric lines.

It's a sunny day, yet—the light doesn't seem to reach the ground. The mountain's presence is as long as it is tall, a void against the horizon shadowing everything below it, and her thoughts, they—

In a way, they seem flat. Unnatural. Not her own. But they're not the hollow things that come to her when she tries to force empathy, put on the persona of someone she doesn't quite fully understand. She doesn't feel the Ripper in his entirety. She doesn't see him. She doesn't see the serial killer on the mountain, can't find an angle to slip inside him.

The grass is soft under her feet, damp. Lecter's just in front of her, close enough to reach out and touch, and his jacket seems so brilliantly black, an absence of light with pinstripes cutting violent lines across it. She feels the leaves sway in the wind and the roots of the trees growing—*slowly, slowly*—as they have since the mountain pushed up from the ground. The water seeps down through the dirt to them and nourishes them and becomes them, just like the water molds the rock and hangs in the mist in the air. It clings to her skin, her tongue, her eyes, under her nails and down her throat.

"Do you hear that?" she whispers, eyes turning up, and Doctor Lecter looks over his shoulder.

"Hear what, Will?"

There are no birds. No animals. Just the water flowing and below that, the mountain itself is rumbling. It's speaking in a thousand different voices in a language she can only *experience*, never understand. A thousand different sorrows and a thousand different pains. A thousand deaths.

She has never been less alone than she is right now.

"Will," says Lecter. His fingers brush her shoulders, lingering until she looks up at him. "Will, where are you?"

"Mount Hikami," she says distantly. It's like she can't breathe, even though she feels the wet air in her lungs. "My name is Will Graham, and I'm on Mount Hikami, in Japan."

Lecter tilts his head consideringly. "Do cases involving children upset you more than others?"

"Every case upsets me."

He looks at her hard for another instant before reaching up. Gently, he rubs the beaded moisture off the lenses of her glasses with his handkerchief and sets them back on her face. Her eyes stay fixed on the little wet circle on the material, the way it rubs against his skin as he puts it back in his pocket.

A few feet ahead, congregated around the ruins of an old building, is the base of the search effort, police and volunteers and the weeping, hysterical family members. Jack is attempting to talk to Hector Gutierrez, though despite them both speaking English, they seem to be badly miscommunicating.

“My daughter did not run away, my daughter did not commit suicide—my daughter is a well-adjusted, happy girl, a straight A student—she’s already planning to go to the University of Tokyo—she *would not ever* do anything to jeopardize—”

“I understand what you’re saying, but in any situation like this, we have to consider all of the —”

“A situation *like what*? Lavinia is *not* the first girl to go missing around here—far from it! There’s *obviously* some sick son of a bitch on this mountain the Japanese police have *ignored* the existence of for years and if you think for one minute that I’m—”

Closer to Will, at the base of an old stone staircase cut into the ground, uniformed men let their Akitas and Bloodhounds off the leash and hold out pieces of clothing for them to sniff, though the dogs seem anxious, whining and shifting from foot to foot. One of the Bloodhounds lets out a howl that sounds more like a shriek but doesn’t go off after the scent. The Akitas keep their ears pinned flat against their skulls.

A pretty Japanese woman turns to look over at the dogs and says something to their trainers that catches Lecter’s attention before going back to arguing with the cop in front of her. She’s polite but insistent, gesturing down at a photo in her hands repeatedly.

“More superstitions,” is all Lecter says for explanation.

The woman’s desperation is like bile in Will’s mouth. She thrusts the photo at the cop and Will moves close enough to see that it’s not one of the missing children. It’s a slightly older girl. A sadder one.

It’s not her daughter. The ages aren’t right. Her sister? But no. There’s the ring of a known fear here. *Can’t let it happen again. Not to this one. I can’t fail again.*

“Are you a private investigator?” Will asks without thinking.

The woman turns, startled, before pausing. “No,” she finally says, with no small amount of hesitation. “I am . . . I own an antique shop in town. But sometimes, I find things.”

Her English is stilted but she’s understandable.

“And people.”

“Not as often.” She looks at Will beseechingly. “You should be careful. It’s dangerous to search for missing people on the mountain.”

“You are.”

“Kozukata-san might be wanting to . . . hurt herself. She doesn’t have any family left to make sure she doesn’t. But the police won’t let me go any further.”

The panic is stifling. It’s everywhere, circling Will on all sides, creeping up from this woman and the parents and the police and even the dogs. They shake the wetness out of their coats compulsively, but it’s started to drizzle rain and they can’t keep dry.

One of them bumps into her as it backs away from its handler, its fangs bared. It must weigh a hundred pounds, and Will’s knocked forward, the contents of the case file in her hand hitting the ground.

The woman stoops along with Will and starts gathering up soggy papers, Doctor Lecter joining them after shooting a lingering look over at the handlers.

“No, no, it’s okay, I’ve got it—”

They ignore her, and soon all the papers are congealing in a wet mess back inside the folder. Lecter hands her the last one and straightens up, looking curiously at the woman.

“Onamae wa nan desu ka?” he asks her.

“Kurosawa Hisoka desu.”

Will barely hears them. The paper that he handed her, the photo—Mitsuko stares back from it, hazel eyes bright with the rainwater. Will can feel it in her hair, sinking through to her scalp, running down into her eyes and past her collar over her back. It’s sliding inside her skin, slipping into her organs, washing out her blood.

She takes a step. Then another. Her fingers crush the edge of the picture and her feet move, tugged along by an invisible string. Up the steps, up the cliffside path beyond them where the screams of a hundred falling people echo in the wide open air beside her.

She steps down into water, shin deep. Lanterns cast broken patterns across the surface as it runs down from a waterfall, and she shudders uncontrollably as it seems to darken black with blood and hair, flowing into the empty eye sockets of dead women laying there in a pile of limbs and sodden clothes.

Then she blinks and they’re gone.

She rears away, staggering and slipping until she reaches the opposite shore. Her ankle goes out from under her with a squelch of mud, but her fingers catch the ground and she claws her way along, never stopping.

The string tightens with each step she takes, so she keeps going, doesn’t look back. (She’s afraid of seeing something else. She’s more afraid of seeing nothing.)

When she comes to the broken bridge, her glasses are dripping and Mitsuko’s picture is filthy and crumpled in her fist. She hears the voices of the search parties in the distance, glimpses faint flashlight beams in the corner of her eye, but across the river is a building sitting quiet and dark.

She's sitting on the edge of the bridge before she really knows what she's doing, pushing herself off and paddling across. She's never been a strong swimmer, but it's not very deep or rapid, and she crawls up between the trees on the embankment without a problem.

The forest is thick off to her left, made especially dark and foreboding by the overcast sky. The trees seem—*overwhelming,* pressing down on the little dirt path winding through them like they're poised to swallow it. Off to the right, though, the path opens up into the large clearing where the building sits.

She dries off her glasses and puts them back on, but she still squints, frowning at the number of little silhouettes she can make out lined across the front. She edges forward, clothes clinging uncomfortably to her skin, and nearly cringes when she realizes they're *dolls*—maybe as many as a hundred, all of them nearly as large as a child and wearing kimonos, with drenched black hair and sightless, staring eyes.

Will never liked dolls, even when she was a girl. They're tiny blank voids where her empathy thinks there should be something more.

She doesn't want to go any further but at the same time—she doesn't want to turn around. There's a flickering at the extreme edge of her vision, heat across the back of her neck, and that same discomfort that comes whenever someone's in her personal space is spreading down her body.

"*Don't look at me*," hisses a voice in her ear.

The *loathing* makes her dizzy. Furious, seething hatred wrapped around with blood and violence and it's all for *her*, for all the ones like her, *I'll slice you apart and rip out your eyes and crush all the secrets they've stolen in my palm—*

Will's voice is locked but her legs, she finally makes her legs work. Forward, past more vacantly watching dolls, around the building, and she rips open the first door she sees.

She keeps her hand on the finger catch after it's shut, pushing it tight against the jamb, and lets her head hit the wood. Of course, it's not like running makes her suddenly *safe*, because she's carrying the problem around inside her skull. Her entire consciousness is filtered through it.

Signals are misfiring in your brain, Will. She can almost hear Doctor Lecter's voice, though not the way she heard the one outside. *We're all the sum of those signals and so you're warping, falling away like numbers on a melting clock. But what is it about this mountain that's affecting them so? Does the death never really leave? Is there a trace caught in one of your mirrors, reflecting it over and over again to all the others?*

Sometimes, on particularly bad days, Will shuts her eyes and imagines that if she concentrates enough, she can feel *something* wrong in her brain. A glitch, a faulty mechanism, synapses sparking the wrong way or too many chemicals seeping out into her spinal fluid and down into her eyes.

Today, she can't imagine anything. Her skin is oversensitive, the sides of her head prickling with hyperawareness. She feels on display, overexposed, *vulnerable*.

And God, she can still hear voices.

There are at least four or five of them, all extremely high pitched. Some of them are laughing, one speaking rapidly in Japanese. The last is tearful and pleading, half-shrieking each word.

They're not right in her ear. Actually, they're muffled, like they're several rooms away, and coming from a particular direction.

Can an auditory hallucination work that way, Doctor Lecter? Or is this a new phenomenon for you to take notes on?

They're not stopping. Even when she squeezes her eyes shut and focuses on breathing—*in out in out, I don't know what time it is I'm on mount hikami my name is will graham*—she can still hear crying and giggling and even footsteps.

Finally, she can't take it anymore. She pushes up and starts slowly towards the sliding doors at the end of the hall, dusty old wood creaking under her feet and more shadowed dolls lurking in the corners.

The doors open to another hallway, stairs to one side and another door, the voices just behind it, across to her right.

Energy coils in her as she hesitates in front of it, her fingers hovering over the catch. It feels on the verge of release, like she's on a cliff and caught in the second when her first foot leaves the ground.

The door pulls to the side and—and the voices stop. She goes a little cold as she looks around a big room full of dolls shoved along every wall and piled onto altars, no children in sight.

She slides her fingers into her hair and tugs, gritting her teeth against her unsteady breathing. The sweat on her scalp is slicker than the water. She could almost cry, break down right here in front of all these little dead-eyed, not-watching not-people.

Doctor Lecter. She needs him to talk to her, to say something or anything so she can latch onto his voice and know that *this* is real; even if everything else distorts away as she watches, *this* exists.

She turns to go, to run until she's far away from all the dolls and the suicides, the nooses hanging from every tree, but something moves with her in the corner of the room. Her eyes snap back and at first the long black hair makes her think it's just another doll sitting there half hidden by the altar—but then the eye *blinks*. It's hazel, swollen red from crying.

With a gasp, it disappears off to the side.

Will sprints forward, slamming her hand down onto the altar as she leans over to look, and for a few seconds she's stunned to silence when she actually *finds* a girl there, cowering back into the wall.

“Mitsuko Akabane,” she says, half questioning.

The girl just shudders, pulling her knees tight to her chest. Her hands clench and unclench in the soaking wet fabric of her skirt, and finally she whispers something in Japanese.

“I’m Will Graham,” she begins haltingly. “I’m with the FBI—I’m here to—Watashi wa Will Graham desu.” It would be nice if that weren’t the only Japanese sentence she knew how to say.

Mitsuko stares at her, swallows convulsively a few times. “Are you alive?”

Will’s even more taken aback, but she’s not Georgia Madchen cowering under a bed, asking that same question of herself. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Then—then, kudasai—” She sniffles. “*Please*, help me.”

Chapter End Notes

Being haunted by ghosts but just thinking you're hallucinating = classic Will.

The cops continue the horror reference names--Kajiro is from Siren and Kobayashi is from The Grudge. Though Mitsuko's last name is from Assassination Classroom. Oh, and speaking of name references, I'm convinced Hisoka Kurosawa was named after Hisoka Kurosaki from Descendants of Darkness.

I don't speak Japanese but I tried to research what I put in there as much as I could. Hopefully it's right.

This is meant to take place like a year or so before the events of the game, when Hisoka was searching for Yuuri on the mountain.

The chapter title is from 'Gasoline' by Halsey.

Thank you for the kudos!

-Anna

please don't go (i love you so, i'll eat you whole)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flipping through Akabane Mitsuko's medical chart, Hannibal is somewhat surprised. Her hypothermia and malnutrition are very mild for a child stranded in the wilderness for a week, especially given the elevation of the mountain and the lack of anything edible amongst the local flora and fauna. (He would know something about being a child out of options in the middle of nowhere, and circumstances hadn't been nearly so kind to him as they apparently were to her.)

He slips quietly into the girl's room and is pleased to find her awake, if glassy-eyed and staring at the wall. The line of her IV twitches as she wrings her hands over and over again.

"Akabane-san," he says, but the girl's mother barely even glances up from her place at the bedside. She's been in a state of constant bawling hysterics and it isn't showing any sign of ending even with her child recovered. (Hannibal really has very little patience with Histrionics, and spends a passing second reflecting on how unfortunate it is that eyeballs are so unpalatably bitter when consumed.)

"My name is Hannibal Lecter; I'm a psychiatrist with the FBI," he continues, stepping further into the room. Finally Akabane Sakura fixes her swollen eyes on him, her potentially striking amber irises covered in a damp film of unshed tears.

"Can you get her to say something? The others, the doctors, the police, they've tried to talk to her and she won't speak! She won't even talk to *me!* I just don't understand, she's safe now and—"

Hannibal gives her a practiced, vacant smile. "We do not have a full picture of what, exactly, she's been through. Withdrawal is not an unusual reaction at this point in time." He shifts his gaze to the girl, who blinks at him owlishly before shrinking in on herself and throwing her hands over her face. She pulls even further away when he sits down next to the bed.

"Mitsuko-san."

She whines and shakes her head, and he's reminded acutely of how much he dislikes children. Sticky, half-formed things, their soft-jelly brains soaked through with idiotic notions and petulant self interest.

"I'm a friend of the woman who found you," he tries, remembering the way she clung to Will's hand as they came down from the mountain, her knuckles white, nails scraping through the mud on the woman's palm when she was finally pulled away. "We work together."

Mitsuko peeks at him through her fingers. "No," she finally says. "No, no, no. Go away. I don't like you."

“May I ask why?”

“Your—” Her voice wavers. “Your eyes.”

“What about them?” he asks, though he already knows. She’s not the first to comment.

“The color.”

“They’re brown.”

“They’re *red*!” she nearly shrieks. “They’re just like *hers*! No one has red eyes, now there are *two*—”

“My eyes can appear somewhat reddish in certain light, but I assure you, they’re just brown.”

She sobs softly, and he frowns. He’s read a great deal of preliminary information on this girl, viewed her school records. She has high marks, involvement in a number of extracurricular activities, and an impressive grasp of English for someone her age. A few minor disciplinary incidents that he would classify as attention seeking. No history of mental health problems.

“I want Graham-sama!”

Don’t they all. The Japanese police have Will off for questions on her miraculous find, and Hannibal has a few of his own. He’d only turned to ask Kurosawa her name, and in that instant it had taken her to reply, Will had vanished.

“She’s in a meeting now with the other police. Everyone is still looking for your friends, and they hope that you can help find them. What if I closed my eyes? Could I ask you some questions?”

After a lingering pause, she nods, sniffling. His lids sink around three-fourths of the way, so he can still make out the blurred material of her hospital gown.

“Why did the four of you go to the mountain to start with?”

“It was Shinji and Lavinia-san. Neither of them are doing very good in geometry, so Goshima and Tsuzuki in their year said that if they got a picture of the Tall Woman, they’d do their homework for the rest of the year and pass them notes during the final. I think Nakamura-san wanted to impress Shinji, so she went, too. And I just . . .” She trails off into silence.

A lack of social interaction was also noted in her records. Hannibal imagines being able to tell a story of a personal encounter with a popular urban legend would get her some vapid, passing attention from her peers.

“Did you get lost on the mountain?”

“No,” she whispers. “Though Lavinia-san’s GPS stopped working when we got there. All our phones did.”

“Were you attacked by someone?”

She fidgets, pallid, her lips smacking together. There's a full glass of water on the bedside table but she hasn't touched it, her IV the only thing keeping her from dehydration. "We didn't find Tall Woman. Maybe she knows better than to be there." She trails off into a fit of quiet, hysterical laugher.

Hannibal waits patiently for her to finish before trying a new tack: "The shrine where Graham-sama found you had already been searched a few days ago and there was no sign of you. How did you end up there?"

She hesitates again, to the point where he thinks she's not going answer. "I was always there. She didn't want me to go. Wanted me to keep playing with her. So she hid me. But she couldn't hide me from Graham-sama."

"So there was another person with you?"

"Shiragiku-sama," she says, trembling.

"Did this Shiragiku take your friends, too?"

"No. She wanted me to play. But they were too old for that."

"*Play*," he repeats, twisting the word on his tongue. It's not a unique pedophilic euphemism, though there is the fact that there hadn't been any signs of sexual assault on the girl. "What kind of . . . *games*?"

"She likes to play ghost marriage a lot. It's because she's waiting for a boy. She has been for a really long time. She can't do anything else. But he grew up and forgot her." Tears well up in her eyes again. "She can't do either, and it's so sad. But I can't be her friend, even if I wanted to be."

"Shiragiku can't grow up?" he repeats, if only to clarify that that *is* what she's trying to say. "How old is she?"

"She's seven. She said that makes her a real person, because her soul is finally hers. Is that true?"

"Were there any adults there with her? Who takes care of her?"

"No one does. No one has to. So she's all alone, except for the other kids. The ones like her. But they don't want to play with her anymore. They just want to go home, like me. But they can't."

None of the missing persons reports he's seen have been for children in Mitsuko's age range; the vast majority are women and girls from their teens to middle age, with clusters of presumably suicidal men here and there. "Did any of these children tell you why they're on the mountain? Is someone making them stay there?"

"They've always been there," she whispers.

“For God’s sake, Mitsuko!” shouts Sakura, her hands slapping at the bed. “Your cousin and those other poor girls are still missing! Can’t you imagine how Aunt Sayuka feels right now? It’s the worst thing in the world! Tell us what really happened so Shinji-kun can come home!”

The girl shuts down at that, of course, any and all ground he might’ve made completely lost. She sobs pathetically, pale, sweaty hands fisting in her hair.

“We wouldn’t want to push her for too much too soon,” he interjects, eyeing the salty tear tracks running through Sakura’s foundation with a vague disdain. She’s *soppy* in a way that makes him want to create something worthwhile out of her, scatter petals of her namesake on a plate around lightly seasoned strips of her tongue and lungs and ovaries. It’s a level of pleasure he’s never before felt, watching Will take the meat of a lesser creature between her teeth and sustain her own life through their death.

“Let her rest,” he says, standing up. Psychiatric nurses brush past him, summoned by Mitsuko’s elevated heartbeat, and soon a sedative is winding its way down her IV into her blood.

“Waiting for the results of her overnight observation is all we can do at this point.” His words hang there in the room, Sakura clutching the top of the metal bedrail in her fists and shaking her head, wallowing in the tear down the center of her paper-thin existence to the exclusion of all else.

He turns to go, more than ready to be free of the unique, sticky stink of the children’s ward, but Mitsuko’s slurred voice stops him with his hand on the doorknob.

“Know her now. They—” She tries to clear her throat but doesn’t have the muscular control. “Your eyes . . . red . . . li-like hers . . . but not like hers. The look . . . Graham-sama’s, they’re . . . ssshhee . . . not like, like Lavinakamura-san . . . They . . . they . . .” Her sentence slips off into a sigh, her breathing evening out. Her head lolls against the headboard until the nurses maneuver her down.

She makes a rather striking picture with her dark hair against the white bedding and her wan face. She could be one of the traditional dolls from the shrine where she was found. (How much more convenient it would be if they could fracture a porcelain skull and take out the information they needed, though he supposes he won’t begrudge the girl her trauma.)

The hall outside the room is still busy despite the hour, over warm and reeking of live bodies. Just underneath is the usual amalgamation of Clorox and Lysol and a dozen other disinfectants, overlain atop blood and vomit and urine. Then there’s the faint, pleasant perfume of Kagura Sayuka’s lotion from where she sits agonizing in the waiting room, face in her hands.

Sakura’s perfect genetic duplicate wears her hair up with combs, and she cries more quietly. It will be fascinating to watch the slow, bitter deterioration of their relationship should Kagura Shinji be found dead, or not be found at all. Despite the stereotype of twins always being closely bonded, he’s usually found them to be festering deep with repressed resentments against one another, still fighting for attention and resources throughout their

lives just as they did in the womb. Now these elements are cohering as he watches, poised to boil over with just one push.

“Well?” barks Crawford to his right, where he’s been pacing with his phone in his hand, his legs much too long for his very small cage. How very presumptuous it is of him to assume that his absence from Baltimore will make any difference to the Ripper. His wife is dying a slow, lingering death one cell at a time and he’s thrown himself into work, always needing a skirt to hide behind. But he’s still nothing more than a gnat buzzing in the background, irritating and begging to be swatted but laughably inconsequential.

“Her cooperation will only come with time, Jack,” he says, the faintest trace of a twitch at the corner of his lips when the man swears and turns back to his phone.

“He says nothing from the girl yet.” He pauses, foot nearly tapping as he listens to the reply. “And you still have to explain to *me* how you found her.”

Next to Sayuka, Akabane Akira is also on his phone, as he has been for the majority of his time here. It’s a wonder his little piglet is even as civilized as she is, what with the mud she was born in.

“No,” says Uncle Jack, “a hunch is *not* a sufficient explanation in these circumstances—”

Sayuka is truly remarkably identical to Sakura, down to the shade of their hair and the color of their eyes. (How disaffecting it must be, to always be one half of a unit, unique in nothing.) Her gaze darts to her brother-in-law as he pulls the phone away from his ear, scowling at it.

“—don’t really care how you did it as long as—Will?” Jack echoes the motion, staring critically at the touch screen as it flickers unstably, static crackling through the earpiece.

Hannibal pulls his suit jacket tighter, blinking against a chill that runs across his face and over the back of his neck.

“Can you hear me? I don’t know what’s wrong with it. Just go to the hotel.” He pauses, then repeats louder: “The hotel! We’ll meet you there! Good, yes, we need to eat!”

And what a horrific little meal it is. Hotel food is always subpar, and theirs has a menu of tourist-pandering, Westernized slop. He pokes his chopsticks disdainfully at a slice of what he’ll generously call meat and turns his nose up, reaching instead to take a long sip of water.

Next to him, Crawford is eating rice with a *fork*. (At least Katz manages to twirl the noodles of her teriyaki drenched atrocity around her chopsticks with a kind of graceful ease.)

And his poor Will—it’s criminal that her first taste of Japanese cuisine should be *onigiri.* When they return home, he’ll make her something appropriate, perhaps out of that persistent, overly-interested Washington D.C. detective from several cases ago whose advances Will had been too socially stinted to notice.

“We haven’t found any evidence of anyone else in the Shrine,” Katz is saying, her mouth full. “The only footprints outside of the altar room were Will’s. Mitsuko wouldn’t have happened to give any hints about how she ended up there, would she?”

“No,” he says. “She’s nearly incoherent. But as of now, foul play still seems a likely possibility.”

“So our guy doesn’t want the girl, but instead of killing her, he drops her off the in most horrifying place he possibly can—”

“Who says he meant it to be horrifying?” Zeller cuts in. “Maybe he thought she’d like the dolls?”

“Have you *seen* those dolls?” Price demands.

“Either way,” he presses on, “he evidently didn’t want to kill a kid.”

“A lust murderer with mercy?” Beverly snorts. “That’s a new one. Most would just kill the girl.”

“It might not do it for him if she’s not the right age.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s a witness. An obstacle to get over. Look at prior cases.”

Hannibal thinks of Mitsuko and her imaginary companions, all of them soothing the scars on her psyche even as they whisper menacingly in her ear. He doubts her half-formed mind will ever be able to realign normally even with a lifetime of therapy, growing out skewed from its maimed center as she ages.

“Maybe that’s what happened to the boy.”

“Or he doesn’t care about gender. Or he gets off on psychologically torturing the boy by making him watch.”

“But keeping three able bodied teenagers under control for an extended period of time? With no gun? Even if they’re tied up, the chances of one of them eventually getting free is always there.”

Hannibal follows the pointless speculation with half an ear, stomach gnawing. He thinks briefly of going down to Tokyo when this is all over, visiting Murasaki’s ashes, but no. That is all very much in the past at this point, once so vivid but now . . . *fading*, pushed gently away by the woman sitting across from him. (*oh, what he didn’t know he was without before her. what a pale, insipid future had been in front of him.)*

She’s not eating. She’s staring fixedly at her plate, not entirely strange for her, but she’s just poking her fork lethargically into the onigiri over and over again.

He can certainly rule out good taste—he’s witnessed her eat, among other things, vending machine food, and there was the one trying occasion she called a drooping drive through

hamburger *delicious*. He takes in the tone of her skin, the relative steadiness of her hands, her even breathing. No early signs of oncoming illness.

He keeps a surreptitious eye on her until the meal comes to an overdue conclusion and Crawford grudgingly sends them off for a few hours of sleep. Then he's a bit taken aback when she gets up without acknowledging him, or any of them, and starts off towards the lobby on her own.

He follows her, calling her name, but she doesn't seem to even notice until the fourth repetition.

"Oh, Doctor Lecter," she says vaguely, eyes darting.

"You seem distracted," he tells her, perfectly neutral, and reaches out to hit the elevator button. (In the corner of his eye, he catches Zeller ascending the main staircase. Price went up about a minute prior. They think they're terribly subtle.)

"It's just . . ." She swallows. "The case."

"Do you see something?"

There's a very drawn out pause. He scrutinizes the minute expressions playing across her face, sees all the same emotions bled into her eyes when he forces a second of contact. She's been unusually disturbed since they arrived at Mount Hikami, and he still doesn't know why.

"No," she finally says. "I don't see anything. About the case."

The elevator dings and admits them. He hits the button for the fifth floor.

"And about things that are not the case?"

She inhales a harsh breath. Above them, the florescent lights flicker.

"I see—I see . . . I see *suicide*." She squeezes her eyes shut. "I feel . . . pain. All different kinds. It and the death, it's in a higher concentration than anywhere I've ever been and it's all over, it's flowing in the water and everything is *drowning* in it—"

At first, he can't quite indentify what he feels. Then he realizes it's *pride*, that same thrill that comes whenever he hears her call the Chesapeake Ripper an artist. But this time it's for her, because even after a hundred years, her mind can reach out and pluck sensation from the air as if it were new.

"If it's overwhelming you, Will, then you shouldn't go back." He knows exactly the fit Crawford would throw if she didn't, the disregard he'd show for her. Hannibal so does love playing the angel to his demon. "We have no idea of the effects of you spending too long in such an environment."

He expects her to hastily shove the suggestion aside, but instead, she doesn't say anything. Staring ahead, she exits the elevator and walks down the hall to her door. She inserts the keycard and finally turns to him one last time.

“I don’t know how I found the girl,” she says with a shaky, unpleasant smile. Then the door’s shutting in his face.

He eyes the peephole momentarily before going to his own room next door. He removes his jacket and waistcoat, imagining Will doing the same with her blouse on the other side of the thin wall. Synchronized with the Ripper just as she was with Hobbs, and she doesn’t even realize it.

Jetlag has never bothered him much and he requires very little sleep, so he sits at the desk and surveys the room, a bland, Western thing like any in America. Down below the window, a tour bus lets a few vacationers off at the hotel entrance.

He finds himself drawing her, pen to paper as he replays her words. She doesn’t know how she found her. Coincidence, he would say, or an educated guess guided by empathizing with the girl, though he doesn’t know why she went searching by herself at all.

He recreates the moment she came back, descending the staircase with her hair heavy and straightened with rainwater, her clothes clinging to the swell of her hips and thighs. Akabane Mitsuko was a timid presence at her side, pale as death and wide eyed, holding tight to her hand.

His pen pauses, ink blotting around their fingers as he studies the image. He’s never wanted children. Never even considered it. But now he has the fleeting thought of Will pregnant, her body shifting and swelling to accommodate his child until everyone knows what he put inside her. And the child itself, both of them alive in something else, entwined together in shared blood and bone, organs and teeth. A permanent link between them with a mind he can’t yet imagine.

He smiles to himself, pleased. One day. Perhaps soon.

Readjusting the pen, he starts in on each individual stone of the steps, memory conjuring up the feel of the mud giving beneath his feet, the mist in the air, the smell of soggy grass. It all starts to seem so vivid and natural that he’s oddly unsurprised when he’s suddenly standing there at the base, snow fluttering silently down on his shoulders.

“You’re the groom, gaijin,” comes a voice beside him. He looks down and finds red eyes, sharp and startling against a white face and white hair and a white kimono. “Now find your bride.”

She points up, up to the top of the stairs, and there’s Will, head bowed, hair drenched. Her kimono is white, too, and wrapped like a corpse’s. Her eyes shift up, peeking out from beneath the strands around her face to meet his and he’s pinned, sliced all the way through. He can’t move even as the snow piles up, deep and cold and searing as a Lithuanian winter. It’s in his mouth and he can’t breathe, *he can’t breathe—*

Until he can. He draws in a breath so cold it hurts and sits up, blinking at the faint dawn light coming through the window. His shirt feels stiff and paper-thin, his lips dry, and there’s a white puff of mist every time he exhales.

The thermostat on the adjacent wall is set to 21° Celsius. Mouth a thin line, he picks up the phone to call the front desk but gets only static.

He shrugs his waistcoat and jacket on, though they do very little to cut the chill. (He hates the cold, like he loathes snow and winter itself. But he's not afraid of it anymore. Not disquieted somewhere deep in his mind.)

He tucks the drawing of Will into his suitcase and starts for the door, keycard in hand. But he only gets halfway before something pings in the lowest levels of his awareness. His instincts have been honed and sharpened to perfection over the years, and while he prefers depending on his own cognizant thought processes, there's no discounting their usefulness.

He doesn't feel alone. He gave a cursory glance around the whole room after he woke up but now it's as though something has been added. But it's not a presence. It feels more like an *absence*, a void, the blank nonexistence of a victim after it expires.

There's something in the corner of his eye, reflected in the mirror. An unkempt, wet kimono. A hand with broken nails dripping water. A face with blood seeping from the mouth and the empty eye sockets, black hair matted to the scalp.

The image sways, slightly distorted, but it doesn't vanish. His eyes stay fixed to it as he hesitates, unsure, before something in him finally pushes him to back away. One step at a time, slowly and carefully, until he's able to thrust out his hand and find the door handle.

It's still there when he shuts the door from the hall.

A hallucination? They're not entirely odd for some people in the hypnopompic state, but he's never had one before. He's not Will.

He looks automatically to her door and his frown deepens instantly when he finds it half open.

"Will?" he calls. He pushes it aside the rest of the way and steps inside. "Will?"

She doesn't answer. She's not there.

Chapter End Notes

I'm stiilll allliiivvveee. Just on a high protein diet. It's a unique form of suffering and it's crippled my ability to do much of anything, including write.

So this takes place vaguely in a heavily altered season one. I haven't seen the vast majority of season two or any of three, so I'm just going entirely off of that first season and the books/movies.

I never knew how difficult Japanese honorifics could be until this. A couple of them are just shots in the dark, really. If you have a suggestion for one that would work better in a certain place, feel free to tell me.

More name references: Sakura for the Sakurazuka family from Tokyo Babylon, Sayuka for Sayu Yagami, Akira for Akira Yamaoka, and Goshima and Tsuzuki for Uzumaki and Descendants of Darkness, respectively.

I managed to beat my poor old Wii into region free submission and finally got around to playing the FFII remake Deep Crimson Butterfly, so I couldn't resist putting in a set of twins.

Chapter title comes from 'Breezeblocks' by alt-J.

Thank you so much for all the kudos and wonderful comments! They make me incredibly happy.
-Anna

you've got a way to keep me on your side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hallucinations are good for Will at this point in time. At any moment the malfunctioning, twisting pathways in her brain can conjure up the blackest, most horrifying detritus from the furthest reaches of her psyche, breathe form into the memory of Garret Jacob Hobbs and a hundred different mutilated victims, their killers' voices burrowing deeper and deeper down into her mind. With each one, the border of reality and fantasy erodes just slightly more, taking with it her perceptions of self and morality, the ingrained social constructs that prevent her from becoming what he knows she could be, and drive her closer to him, her sole tether to clarity.

The only thing that has ever bothered him about it is that he doesn't know *why* she hallucinates. He's certainly considered an exhaustive range of causes. Encephalitis and meningitis, though he could smell neither on her, were ruled out by a CT scan. She lacks any of the other criteria for a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and she's far from manic even at her most energized. Lesions, seizures, tumors, past head trauma; every remotely possible psychological or physiological source all vetted and ruled out.

Of course she could never be so easily explained. But one day, when the carefully constructed barriers in her mind collapse in on themselves and she allows herself to fully *see* him in his entirety, acknowledge and accept everything about him that he knows she already senses, she'll no longer need such fluid edges to her perception. That's when something will have to be done.

But now he stands breathing in thick, wet air, entertaining the uninvited image of the two of them reflecting the worst parts of each other back and forth continuously, their minds decaying away into psychosis together, a frothing, inescapable folie a deux.

Hannibal wants to consume Will in every way he can. He wants to suck at her meat and her blood and her lips, pick through each thought she has and hold her madness, her understanding, in the palms of his hands, letting it play across his fingers.

But that madness, that overabundant, uncontrolled empathy that allows her to know him, is at the same time intrinsically differentiating. He can never *know* empathy, truly place himself into the emotional position of another. His mind *deflects*. He doesn't absorb madness.

He is perfectly sane. Oh, if the public at large ever found out about the things he does, they wouldn't label him as such—they'd immediately deride him as a madman, something twisted and subhuman, no better than a rabid animal. It would soothe the masses to separate him from them in such a manner, to assure themselves that there's something so *wrong* with him that it removes him from their species. How unwilling they are to acknowledge the extreme ends of the spectrum of human behavior.

He is sane from both a medical and legal standpoint. His thoughts are always perfectly clear, perfectly organized; he is in complete control of himself and his actions, aware of their context and consequences. A lack of one specific range of emotions doesn't make his mind ill, as it's simply that—an *absence*.

He should be incapable of reflecting Will the way she reflects him. But yet.

Perhaps it was just half a dream while he was stuck somewhere between sleep and waking, his thoughts scattered by the cold and churning with murdered Miko and the yuurei and onryou from the stories of Murasaki's servants in his youth.

(He has never had difficulty distinguishing between sleep and wake before. His consciousness has distinct borders, and he knows them.)

A year ago, with these concerns, Will would've soon been dead. Even in the beginning, when she was just Jack Crawford's tortured, odd little curiosity, raw with so much *potential.*

But now that potential is in the middle of jagged, agonizing transformation and he's faced with the prospect of finding her corpse tangled in underbrush, rainwater softening her skin for decay after she's succumbed to exposure or the attentions of a prurient idiot brimming with inadequacy and sexual rage.

The thought makes his teeth grind and his lips tighten and his hands clench tightly enough to hurt the knuckles. (Even though she should die just for that alone, for drawing these emotions out of him. It's inconvenient to care about anything outside of oneself. It's *dangerous*.)

"She's gone."

He turns at the voice, so filled with certainty, and finds the Kurosawa woman from yesterday approaching him. The same picture of that wilting teenage girl is once again in her hands.

"Isn't she? Graham-san has disappeared."

Hannibal rakes his gaze over her face, letting his eyes go empty and piercing in a way he knows makes people uncomfortable, and when he finally meets her gaze, she flinches away.

(For half an instant, he feels the ghosts of sensations long past, thick blood running from his palms up his arms, the slide of human flesh down his throat, the bite of snow against his face. It washes up over him like a wave, emotions and memories reaching out for the forefront of his consciousness with bony fingers but receding just before they get there, gone as if they were never there at all.)

Kurosawa's hand has been incrementally tightening around the picture, the girl's face warping with the paper.

"She—" Her voice wavers. "She's in danger."

Hannibal wants to kill this woman and gouge out her eyes.

"How do you know she's gone?"

Kurosawa stares at the ground. “She’s not here with the rest of you.”

“She could be at the hotel. The police station. How do you know she’s missing?”

She’s silent for a moment. “You looked at the hotel. You looked everywhere. There’s only the one place she could be.” She glances towards the trail up the mountain. “I—I need to look for someone, too, but the police won’t let me right now. I’m just a civilian. But I know the mountain better than anyone. I could be your guide. I could help you find her.”

That this woman is holding something back is so obvious it’s insulting to his intelligence. He recalls what she said yesterday, about the dogs—*their senses are confused because of the spiritual energy, all they can smell is the death*—and wonders if she isn’t so familiar with the mountain because she’s some paranormal enthusiast. Or maybe she’s a reporter conducting her own investigation—there’s a camera bag slung over her shoulder, leather strap crushing the lacy blue material of her shirt.

Nevertheless, she could prove useful in resolving this quickly, even if only in her capacity as a guide. (He thinks of Will, of the process of decay, of the insects burrowing into her and *eating* her—)

Uncle Jack agrees to Kurosawa’s presence with little fuss, of course. Anything to get his favorite bloodhound back. The woman gives him a stiff bow and stares off lingeringly into the dusky expanse of space leading up the mountain before turning back to Hannibal.

“Do you have anything of hers?” Her eyes fix on his tie in a way that reminds him of Will, though the role of eye contact in Japanese culture makes it stand out far less.

“Excuse me?”

“Something she owns. A personal possession. Or even just a picture of her. I need—I *prefer* to have something like that with me, when I search.”

“And why is that?”

Her fingers clench and unclench around the camera strap, unable to stay still as she lies. “It helps to . . . personalize them. To make me feel as if I know them.”

Hannibal runs the pads of his fingers over the objects in his pocket, considering. The metal and oily, overused glass of the cellphone with its laughably simple passcode Will doesn’t know he knows contains nothing but the numbers of coworkers and her white trash father, the odd picture or two of animals she finds *cute*. Then there are the glasses, the protective film through which she can view the world, phantom warmth from her skin still on the frames.

“You’re not searching for her,” he says. “We are.”

“But it would help me as your guide,” she insists, voice growing firmer. Then, with a note of pleading, she adds in English: “*Please*.”

Hannibal gives her the phone. He goes on to watch with a curious eye as she turns it over and over again in her hands, thumb smoothing down the front and back in turn. She flicks it to the

passcode screen but doesn't do anything more, nodding to herself.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "I'll be sure to give it back to her."

They ascend the eroding stone steps, Katz trailing Crawford after loudly insisting that she isn't staying behind. Zeller and Price, ever the herd animals, follow her lead.

At the top, Hannibal shoots half a glance back to the bottom, less of a distance than it was in the dream. Will had seemed so very far away from him, standing in the place he is now.

(Even now, in the midst of the wide expanse of the mountain, its sea of black trees, there's a faint nagging in the back of his head, a powerlessness that produces energy he can do nothing with. She's slipped her collar, she's gone . . .)

Ducking under the remnants of a collapsed Torii gate, Kurosawa leads them forward briskly, feet confident on the terrain. She has on a pair of worn black hiking boots, a preparation Hannibal failed to think of. The ground isn't *swampy* like one of Will's Louisianan bayous, but it nonetheless sits damp, small streams spilling over here and there to keep the dirt soft and the grass dewy.

His shoes are ruined by the time they start up a narrow pathway clinging to a rock wall, a wide expanse of empty space and a steep drop just one misstep away. The acoustics of the place are odd, air whistling and bouncing against the trees and stone until it sounds nearly like a chorus of screams.

Collapsed rocks bar the path after a while, forcing them off into a reservoir of water that sloshes up to their knees. Hannibal's lips twitch in disgust at the cling of material to his legs, shoes and socks constricting heavily around his feet. To his left, Katz skims her hand over the surface, apparently mesmerized by the sight of her own murky reflection.

Kurosawa pauses, stiff, in the center of the pool. She stares at the base of a small waterfall, cordoned off with a sacred rope and flanked by tourou lanterns. They flicker, the water not quite catching the light, and he's struck with how odd it is they're lit—by the search teams, he assumes, as he's not aware of any organization that maintains the structures on the mountain.

Kurosawa reaches to her side and opens her camera bag. She withdraws something bizarrely out of date—a box camera, the kind nearly as old as photography itself, with wood detailing and a lens that slides out from within the chamber.

The shutter is loud. Katz and Price shiver, and Hannibal feels chilled as well, as though his clothes are freezing to his skin.

"People used to come here to die," says Kurosawa. "They thought that it was the best way they could. That it was a good death."

Just as they claim Aokigahara is *a perfect place to die*. Pathetic mewlings of pigs who don't possess even the necessary fortitude to exist.

Kurosawa's gaze lingers at that spot at the bottom of the waterfall before finally continuing on. Hannibal follows close behind, eyes on the back of her head. She's not a reporter, that much is now clear. She doesn't have the ruthless practicality. A folklorist, perhaps? It meshes somewhat better, though the camera is still hard to explain.

The dirt path on the opposite side of the pond eventually terminates in a broken bridge. A river flows lazily beneath, and across it, he can make out the shadowy form of a building sitting in a clearing carved into the trees.

Kurosawa leads them around, off onto a branching trail that twines through the trees on the bank of the river.

The daylight, already insubstantial, can't penetrate past the branches. Though the trees aren't bunched all that closely together, they're interspersed around piles of rocks and earth displaced by hundreds of years of landslides. It's *labyrinthine*, even to Hannibal's well developed sense of direction, tree trunks, shallow ponds of stagnant water, and dirt paths covered in a congealing layer of dead leaves blending rapidly into one another with no distinguishing features. The only mark that they're not going in circles comes with the occasional appearance of abandoned, decaying tents, their owners long since gone.

(In the corner of his eye, Hannibal sees something swinging—back and forth and back and forth, even and calm, but when he whips his head around, there isn't a noose. There isn't anything.)

The air doesn't feel any lighter once they finally break free of the maze, crossing a little footbridge into the courtyard of the Doll Shrine.

"A team's already checked here," says Crawford. "It was the first place searched this morning."

"It's not the Shrine that we want," she says. "It's what's beyond it."

There are hundreds of ichimatsu dolls. *Thousands*. All well made, but suffering from age and exposure. The dampness has permeated everything, eating at the dolls' kimonos, warping the wood of the shrine itself.

The hallway off the entrance is mottled with a variety of recent footprints and scuffmarks in the dust. Traditional sliding doors lead deeper inside, through still, silent rooms filled with altars lined with more of the same—and yet for their uniformity, he sees a wide scope of variation between all of them, differing little details in the clothes and sizes, faces and hair.

Their eyes are all the same.

(Murasaki had had a doll with those eyes. Sometimes he used to think he saw them staring back at him when he looked in the mirror.)

The grandest room in the building is flooded, three short staircases sinking down to an interconnected walkway. The altar itself is encaged behind a wooden grid, dust free but with an underlying stench of mildew.

A hallway beyond, through a room of shelves stacked with dismembered doll parts waiting in futile for repair, is the back door.

“What the actual fuck?” Katz mutters under her breath as she steps out, attention immediately caught.

Attached to the trees lining the walkway are ropes, and dangling at the end of them are more dolls, all the size of young girls. There’s no wind but they still *sway* ever so slightly, just like a limp corpse with a broken neck.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. He’s unaware of any custom like this in Shinto.

Kurosawa doesn’t offer explanation, just leads them on to the base of a staircase, steeper than the first, with faint gold light spilling down from the top. More lit lanterns, these lining a stone walkway to the elaborate entrance of another shrine.

Katz flies to the entranceway, this one in slightly better condition than the Doll Shrine’s, and pushes uselessly at the door.

“Damn it!” She beats her fist on it for good measure.

“Why weren’t we told there’s another building on the mountain?” Jack thunders.

Kurosawa hesitates as she deciphers the sentence and parses out her reply. “There are maps of the mountain from when a resort was planned here. Have you not seen one?”

“We must’ve been too busy actually *finding* people to get the chance!”

Oh yes. *We*. Jack’s accomplishments were Jack’s. Will’s also always ended up being Jack’s. Miriam Lass’s would’ve been, too, if she’d lived long enough to have any.

“The police would’ve already searched this place,” says Kurosawa, edging to the side. She seems distracted, glancing past Jack’s shoulder into the dim copse of trees lining the path.

“*Yesterday*.”

“She’s not in there.” There’s a staunch, confident finality in her voice, along with a small touch of impatience. She’s starting to verge on *nervous*, curiously enough, both hands wandering down to the camera bag at her hip to fiddle with the fastenings.

Katz braces her arms against the door and lets it take her full weight. Then she prods Zeller and Price into doing the same, all to no avail.

Crawford curses the reception on his cellphone, frowning deeply as the display flickers into broken blocks.

“She’s not in there, Crawford-san,” she repeats.

“How would you know?”

Kurosawa's lies don't come seamlessly. Her fumbling hesitation isn't due to *language.* She finally chooses vagueness. "There's a place she's much more likely to be."

(Kurosawa isn't a killer. He knows that much for sure. But the elements of her that *are* present don't want to connect into anything coherent.)

She steps off onto a dirt path branching away to the right. Hannibal hesitates before he follows, compelled to glance over his shoulder.

The lanterns cast irregular, jumping shadows across the trees, and as they twist and glance off of leaves that seem to repel the light, he (*almost thinks he*) sees a glint of metal.

"Do you hear that?" he asks.

"I don't hear anything," Kurosawa lies.

Hannibal's senses are his own, the mechanism through which his reality is experienced, and he *knows* them. He *knows* what he hears. (Just like he *knows* what he sees, except this morning he has *no idea* what he saw and that—)

The hollow, rhythmic strike of metal against stone follows him until he's well down the dirt path, a faint whisper on the air from somewhere far away. (Nearly *unreal*. But there.)

The cemetery lying ahead is filled with row after row of blank grave markers. There's no order in their arrangement, no apparent significance within the layout of the flooded, disordered walkways. The original lot was doubtlessly gradually added to over time, the expansions poorly planned up to the point that a mass of graves are stacked on top of each other. They form a pyramid, crumbling, weather-beaten rock climbing into a point well above their heads.

Kurosawa hadn't lied about knowing the mountain well. When she finally leads them up onto dry land and pushes open a set of doors, she hasn't taken one wrong turn the entire time.

The desolate landscape they step into is so alien in comparison to the previous forest they might as well be in an entirely different place. Vast expanses of volcanic rock stretch out in every direction, devoid of any life. It's startlingly *dry*, though the thin air still has some faint undercurrent of mist hanging in it.

Pinwheels spin silently in what little breeze there is, wound among the Jizou statues that sit in lines against the rock. A larger statue is enshrined in an altar further on.

Kurosawa's pace has increased. Her fingers clench around Will's cell phone, her breath hitching and her feet crunching across sand as she brings them to a wide, colorless beach.

More pinwheels and rocks and washed out empty space, and Kurosawa stops, staring out across the massive lake before them.

Will's silhouette—when he *sees* Will's silhouette dark against the violent red light of the setting sun, moving, *alive*—

He doesn't think. (And perhaps that will *disturb* him later in a way he shouldn't be able to be disturbed, because in that moment there was something simply not *there*, a capability to stop himself suddenly gone that not even rudeness has ever brought about—)

When his feet and legs sink into the water, the smell hits something in the back of his throat that causes it to involuntarily contract. It's sour and filthy, a thick *reek* clinging on all sides like a physical thing. The water seems too heavy against his movement, resisting each step he takes, and when he glances away from Will's back to look down at it, it's *black*, glossy and twisting in a way that reminds him involuntarily of Murasaki's *hair*.

Will has stopped a distance from shore, somehow *small* as she stares into the distance at a Torii gate just visible on the horizon.

His fingers wrap around her upper arms. (*She's whole, she's alive, she's back under his hands.*)

"Will," he says, tugging gently. "Will, do you know where you are?"

"Doctor Lecter," she says faintly. "You're here. You . . . followed."

"Of course I did, Will. We've been searching for you. You weren't in your room this morning."

"I have to get to the Shrine. It's time."

"Time?"

"The pain. No more of it. Only what I already have. I have to fall with it, forever. But I won't be alone. You won't flinch from me. Not you. It'll be you and me and the pain and the water, and everything else will be washed away." She rocks against his grip. "I have to get to the Shrine."

"Will—"

"Let me go!" She reaches up to pry at his hands, kicks back at his shins. Their feet slip in silt and water sloshes up over his arms and down his chest, her dripping hair hitting his face. He's never touched her hair before, and as he braces his arm against her neck to cut off blood flow to her brain, he allows his fingers to skim it.

This is a pale echo of what it will be like if he ever has to kill her. Of course he would never do her the insult of stabbing her in the back, never deprive *himself* of her last thoughts being that he's the one taking her life. Her body, her mind, her meat, her existence, it's his to do with as he pleases, to eat or build up or tear down, destroy and recreate in the way he wants, cage within his hands and father a child to *take take take take* from the inside out. Oh, he doesn't *want* to kill Will, doesn't want to be faced with that being a necessity, because for all that he would love to taste her and make her a part of himself, she's so much better alive than dead. It would be a *waste*, and that's the true tragedy, isn't it, to be *wasted*?

She keeps shouting with growing incoherency as her nails rake down his fingers, drawing blood. She's getting weaker, slipping away so quickly; he could snuff her out like a candle and that's exactly how he would have to do it, because he's realized he couldn't draw it out in his usual way. Thrust the knife in and let her chest heave against his and her blood run over his hands until it all stops and it's like she never existed at all.

He would die with her, he finds himself thinking as he stares past her shoulder into the sunset. She's clinging to her last threads of consciousness, his cheek pressed into her temple skin to skin as she tries to give a few last jerks of her head. He keeps her still, mesmerized by the feel of her, the orange light against the Torii gate, and yes, he would die with her. Let them both decay down into each other until she's a part of him and he of her in a way that nothing could've accomplished in life.

When she finally goes limp, head lolling back to his shoulder, he blinks, eyes jerking to her automatically as he shifts to support her full weight. The sunlight, oddly absent of heat, skirts the edge of his vision as he gets her around the shoulders and under the knees and turns back to face the shore with her in his arms. She's only a scant few inches shorter than him, and with the added obstacle of the water, it takes him longer than he would like to pick his way back to the beach.

They're both soaked through, clothes plastered to their skin and water running off them in rivulets down to the sand. Katz is on them immediately, brushing Will's hair out of her face, *obnoxious* in her nerve.

"What happened?" she demands, as though those pathetic, half-hearted attempts at earning Will's *friendship* entitle her. "Did she faint?! How did she get here?"

"Her symptoms point toward a dissociative fugue—"

"A *fugue state*?" Crawford cuts in. "I was under the impression, Doctor Lecter, that she was improving."

Only because that's what he wanted to see. Ignoring the cracks in the teacup to feel better about continuing to use it.

"*This* isn't improvement!"

"Will told me that she was struggling with this environment. The history of the mountain—"

"What does any of that matter right now?" Katz demands. "She needs a hospital!"

"The closest one is two towns away," Kurosawa says. "And we still have to get down the mountain. But you are a doctor, Lecter-san, yes? Perhaps it would be best for her if we let her rest in my shop for the night instead of taking her so far. I have spare rooms."

Crawford begins to refuse.

"I think that may be best for her," Hannibal interjects above him. Rude, but as he gazes pointedly at Kurosawa, there's no doubt she knows he knows she can tell him more. She

won’t quite let him catch her eye.

“I think I might be able to . . . make clearer what’s going on,” she finally admits. “I don’t think you will believe me, but I must try. I need to, for your sake. For hers.”

“Are you saying you have information pertinent to this case? You—”

“At my shop, Crawford-san. We shouldn’t stay here any longer. The sunset is—*dangerous* itself, but the mountain at night is . . .” She swallows convulsively, shoots a glance towards the sky that lingers for a touch too long before she seems to jerk herself away. “We have to hurry.”

Chapter End Notes

This update is so late. *facepalm* I do have excuses, though: first off, I always knew this chapter was going to be a lot of just walking on the mountain, and if there's anything I hate/fail at writing it's "and then they walked there, and then they walked through that, and then they went over there . . ."

Then came the move from hell. I . . . can't even relive it at this point, so let's just say it involved a scummy rental corporation taking advantage of the end of a lease to get new renters they could charge an illegal increase and a scummy landlord taking advantage of my mother's panic/extremely poor decision making to rent a house that, among other things, was full of mold, filthy, stunk of skunks, and had only one functioning bathroom. That led to threatened lawsuits and ultimately ANOTHER FUCKING MOVE within the span of THREE WEEKS, thankfully into a much better house.

By then, I'd forgotten all the details I would need to write this chapter. And then college started and delayed me being able to sit down and play the game again.

But it's here now!!! *ahem* So, Hannibal continues being the creepiest mofo to ever exist. Beverly, on the other hand, will shortly become the biggest bamf to ever exist. (Hisoka will probably get in on that as well.) I have a rampant dislike of Jack, if you didn't notice.

Next stop: tea at Kurosawa Antique Shop, which doesn't contain a single thing I don't want to buy.

Chapter title comes from the song 'I Walk the Line' by Johnny Cash, covered by Halsey.

Thank you all so very much for the comments and kudos. They've really helped get me through and motivate me to finish this chapter. :)

-Annastasia

i believe in anything that brings you back home to me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurosawa Antiques Shop has a distinctively *homey* feel to it, in spite of the integration of a large storefront window and a checkout counter. Though not advertized on the sign, it seems to function as a café as well, with a few mismatched tables set out amongst the controlled clutter of the shop's wares and the number of cups and saucers on display far outnumbering the rest of the knickknacks and curios. They sit behind the counter, on old tables in need of refinishing, beyond the glass windows of a few western-style hutches.

The space is warm and smells pleasantly of tealeaves and coffee beans, the overall style neither distinctly Japanese nor western. A collection of clocks of varying styles click in tandem, and a radio on the bar hums quietly with white noise.

A soft light radiates out from a Tiffany lamp, one of several tucked away on a table in the center of the room, throwing a figure into shadow.

"Hojo-san," Kurosawa greets, one eye never quite straying from Will. She just stands there passively, though, damp and shivering intermittently, silent.

"I tried calling you," the man says, stepping into the light. He's quite young, though accompanied by a person even younger, a teenager Hannibal has to look at closely before he can determine sex. Female, but distinctly uninterested in presenting as so, drowning in androgynous clothing that hides any secondary sexual characteristics.

"I'm working on it," says Kurosawa briskly.

"That's what you keep saying."

"These things have to be taken slowly."

Hojo frowns, dissatisfied. His eyes linger somewhere in the vicinity of Kurosawa's abdomen. "I'm *paying* you—"

"It's very dangerous lengths to go to, to write a book."

He shifts, fingers twitching at his sides. The girl glances at him quickly from the corner of her eye.

"You've even dragged Sakaki-san into this."

That raises Hojo's hackles. "Don't start on that again."

"You know he's nowhere near responsible enough to—"

“Your disapproval is well noted, Kurosawa-san. But my friends are not your concern. Only what I’ve hired you to find.” He finally raises his gaze, face drawn and another word on the tip of his tongue. But all that comes is a sharp exhale.

He had glanced, apparently accidentally, at Will, and as his eyes slid over hers, they stopped. His expression tightens into something close to that of a very rude cashier upon regaining consciousness to the sight of a carving knife.

Will doesn’t look away from him. (It’s usually involuntary, something too open and anxious passing over her in a half-instant of contact that makes her turn away, squirming nerves building in her if she forces herself not to. But not this time.)

Though he’s gone tense, barely sucking in breath, Hojo doesn’t look away either. His hands are trembling.

“W-we’ll talk about it later,” he rasps, his Japanese gone painfully formal. Then he *bolts*, edging back and away from Will before rushing past them to the door of the shop.

“It’s not too late,” comes Will’s voice, oddly flat.

Hojo freezes, his hand halfway to the door handle.

“To know if it really happened,” she continues. “You know where you have to go.”

Shuddering, Hojo flees.

In the confused, burgeoning silence left behind him, the girl bows deeply, flustered. “I’m very sorry,” she says, eyes trailing worriedly after him. “It’s just that Hojo-sensei is very afraid of women. Some more than others . . .” Now she looks curiously at Will, before quickly lowering her gaze to the floor.

Kurosawa doesn’t seem at all taken aback. “Tell him I’ll call him when I get the chance, Kagamiya-san. But I’m very busy right now.”

“Of course,” Kagamiya says, bowing again.

She can’t seem to help but glance a last time at Will before she follows her teacher out.

“What the hell is going *on*?” Katz demands.

Kurosawa ignores her. “You’re very tall, Graham-san, but I think I can find some dry clothes for you.” She hovers her hand over the back of Will’s arm and guides her forward through a door at the far end of the room. The wooden hallway beyond is long and squared, leading past a multitude of doors to a steep stairway, and on to another floor just as large.

In the center of the building, three walls of wet, dripping glass extend from the bottom of the first story to the ceiling of the second, looking out upon a garden courtyard. It’s drab and gray and largely dead, a few sparse trees swaying in the storm around the ancient remnants of a stone well.

The building is relatively tidy and well maintained, with evidence of updating here and there and a few western finishes, but it must've been passed down in Kurosawa's family. However far from Tokyo, it's too large to be within her means, whether she be a photographer, folklorist, or antiques dealer.

Beside a balustrade overlooking the storefront is one last door. The space on the other side is half storeroom, half bedroom, with a cot and a dresser pushed in amongst miscellaneous clutter, one wall almost entirely dominated by a kimono airing on a rack.

While Kurosawa bustles around collecting blankets and clothing, Hannibal turns to Will. The daze he first found her in hasn't improved with her return to consciousness.

For the first time, as he takes in her faraway eyes and blunted affect, he wonders if she truly does have schizophrenia. A history of psychiatric disturbances dating back to early childhood, worsening at the onset of puberty, slowly building to a breaking point, a threshold finally crossed.

"Will," he says.

Slowly, she tips her head in his direction.

"I need to check your neuromuscular control. So while I know you don't feel like it, please smile for me."

She blinks. Frowns. Finally, the edges of her lips pull up fractionally into something brittle and strained.

He reaches his hand out to her face, slides his palm over the too-cool skin of her cheek. His thumb pulls at her lower eyelid to better expose the bloodshot ball underneath.

(Schizophrenia is not entirely untreatable. But would there be any room left for her perception when the medication reorganized her mind? Though what good is anything she sees if there's nothing left of her to make sense of it?)

Kurosawa is watching them too closely. There's always been something behind her eyes that's just out of his reach, and he'd like nothing more than to slam her head into the floor until they pop and it all spills out.

"Here," she says, handing a pile of neatly folded clothes to Will. "Would you like some coffee or tea? I have decaffeinated."

"No," Will mutters.

"We'll be just downstairs, then. Try to get some sleep, but call if you need anything, okay?"

Will nods, stringy dark hair falling in her face.

Kurosawa shuts the door gently behind them and leads them back the way they came, repeating her offer of coffee or tea.

Hannibal accepts out of politeness, sitting down at a small table Kurosawa gestures to while she goes behind the counter to prepare it. She lines six porcelain teacups and their saucers along the top, takes containers of leaves and beans off of their shelf.

“You speak English very well,” Katz comments, moving to straddle a barstool.

Kurosawa laughs wistfully. “Yes, well, I was very restless as a girl. I knew the world was so much bigger than here, and I wasn’t satisfied. So I didn’t stay.”

“But you came back.”

“I realized that, as many other places as there are, this is mine.” She smiles and sets a cup of black tea down in front of Katz, then hands the appropriate cups to the others in turn.

Hannibal takes a cursory sip of his green tea. He’s not thirsty, but it’s hot. His clothes have mostly dried in the air, but in its wake the water has left a chill on his skin, fighting to corrode down through layers of tissue to his bones.

Kurosawa sets a teapot down on the table between them and takes her place across from him. She doesn’t speak right away, staring at the floral pattern worked into the old metal surface.

“Well?” Crawford prompts. He might as well be tapping his foot.

She gives a wan, nauseated little smile that’s more of a grimace. “Lecter-san,” she begins cautiously, “do you believe that, after a person dies, there’s anything . . . more?”

“No. We are the sum of a series of chemical reactions and electrical impulses in the brain that create what we perceive as consciousness. When those cease to be, so do we.”

“Nothing more? You don’t think that you . . . that Graham-san has a soul?”

“Will has a unique mind. The concept of a soul is a very outdated one.”

“She . . . knows things, right? Things she shouldn’t. Couldn’t. She doesn’t know how she knows, either. And sometimes, she sees things. Horrible things, that no one else can.”

(Sometimes, Will stares into space, hands clenched at her side, trying not to shrink away.

“He’s followed me,” she said once, sweating and shivering, pupils blown as they let too much in. “All the way from Minnesota. I see. I *see*.”)

“She has an empathy disorder,” he says, slipping softly over the wrong side of the line of doctor-patient confidentiality. Alana would be outraged, but she’s not here, is she? “She can assume the viewpoint of another in a way you and I cannot understand.”

“But I do understand,” Kurosawa insists, shifting uncomfortably. “Here, it’s—If Graham-san had been born here two hundred years ago, her parents would’ve given her to the Shrine.”

“‘Given her?’” Katz repeats blankly.

“It was a common thing, to give a daughter to the Shrine. I told you that it was considered a good way to die, there on the mountain, amongst the water. Life comes from water, cannot exist without it. But in that, there must also lie death. This cycle was central to the Miko.”

“In what way?” Though Hannibal has a special disdain for the Christianity spoonfed to him in early childhood, all religion is laughable, with simpering, hollow little adherents grasping for something to validate themselves with.

(He has the faintest impression of a memory of his hand in his father’s, Mischa tugging on the side of his shirt, all of them small and lost in the midst of rows and rows of crosses pushing into each other, no space between them. They all seem so harsh and sharp, spikes stabbing at the sky.

“Why do people do this, Father?” he asks, but it’s always Murasaki who answers, kneeling in front of her shrine before photos and portraits of her ancestors.

“The spirits of the ones who came before watch over us,” she tells him, smiling gently. What a waste of her time, he thinks, because the dead are just that—cold and vacant and *not there*.)

“The water on the mountain—the mountain itself—it’s *special*. A place of great . . . significance.”

She’s fairly adept at repeating the same thing over and over again in slightly different phrasing while not saying anything at all. Perhaps she’s had practice.

“But then there was a massacre of the Miko, about a century and a half ago. Some of the villagers here, like myself, are descended from what few survivors were left, but even we don’t know the exact reason why it happened. Surely you’ve heard at least one version. A man was scorned by a Miko who chose her duty over him, or something along those lines? It couldn’t have really been that, of course, but I suppose it’s probably more . . . compelling than the actual cause.”

“Why couldn’t it have been that?” asks Katz.

Kurosawa looks soberly at her. “No one who met the Miko lived for very long afterwards. They didn’t expect to. Everyone who went to Hikami knew they weren’t coming back.”

“So it was . . . what, religiously assisted suicide?”

She inclines her head. “We didn’t use to have the same prohibitions against it here as you do in the West. The Miko consoled those seeking to die, made it so that they didn’t have to face the end alone. But after the massacre—” She hesitates, tracing her thumb over the side of her teacup. “It was corrupted. All of it. It is not a holy place anymore.”

Hannibal takes a very protracted sip of his tea, staring at her steadily over the rim. He must admit that she looks and sounds completely sincere, not a thing in her voice or microexpressions indicating a lie, but that doesn’t mean anything. He’s treated people who *sincerely* believe that there are bugs and government manufactured microchips under their skin.

“You ascribe to the local belief that there are supernatural forces at work on the mountain.”

Slowly, she drags her eyes up from his chest to his face and holds his gaze for the first time. Her eyes are a dark brown, watery and big. “A place of power is always a place of power. But what kind depends on circumstance. There are forces there that have been unchecked for over a century. These disappearances are nothing new. Could a serial killer be responsible for all of them?”

“It’s a suicide hotspot. There may never have been one to begin with.”

“I’m telling you that’s not responsible for all of them. Here, we have a very old saying—that when Hikamiyama rumbles, we must bathe in its water. But if your daughters vanish, do not be surprised.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Crawford sighs, equal parts disappointed and irritated.

“Graham-san is in danger,” Kurosawa insists sharply. “And from more than just her mind. She never should’ve come here.”

Hannibal supposes that’s one thing they can both agree on, after a fashion. This is beginning to set itself apart from the usual, become something of a different nature than intrusive, involuntary thoughts of a killer drowning out her own.

“You care for her, Doctor Lecter,” Kurosawa says quietly, cuttingly. “More than you should. *More than you ought to be capable of*.”

Her shift to Japanese on the last sentence is so abrupt, the implication so unexpected, that he’s actually *startled*.

“The black water is very off putting, desu ne? But you followed her anyway. You didn’t even hesitate. And you’ll follow her again, when the mountain takes her. She’s not the only one in danger.” She sips her tea in the beat of tense, unsure silence that ensues, then changes once again to Japanese: “I feel that maybe, it’s Graham-san’s nature to attract darkness. In one form or another. You’re a very selfish man, Doctor Lecter, so if only for your own sake: take her and leave. As soon as you can.”

“Could you speak English, please?” Crawford grits out, looking between them. There’s a storm brewing there, because feeling left out of the loop never mixes well with little brains that like to think they’re in control of everything.

“If you stay here,” Kurosawa continues, obligingly in English, “there’s very little that can be done for you.” She stands up and crosses over to the front of the shop, retrieving her camera from the edge of the table she left it on when they came in. “Have any of you ever heard of Doctor Kunihiko Asou? I’m not surprised. He was a very obscure scientist from—well, around the time of the massacre. Meiji-era. He believed that there’s another world side by side with our own where the spirits of the dead dwell, and he devoted his life to trying to find proof of it. Over the course of his career, he invented a lot of things meant to tap into that world, make it more visible to the living.” She chuckles. “There are rumors he even modified things like radios and flashlights, but none of those are still around today. He used to have a

museum on a little island to the north, but everything there was . . . lost." Her smile fades at the thought, and she sets the camera down on the table in front of Hannibal, slinging the carrying case over her shoulder. "The main remnants of Doctor Asou's work are a series of cameras."

Hannibal can scrutinize the thing better now, though there's nothing particularly remarkable about it save the age and a series of seemingly random kanji engraved around the lens. It has some fine gold detailing here and there and looks well cared for—probably it was expensive at one point in time.

"It's not exactly known what he did to them," she says, running her fingers along the top, "but they have the ability to capture things that can't be seen with the eye. Glimpses of that otherworld."

Katz and her two idiots stare bemusedly. Crawford huffs in disgust and turns away, which Hannibal himself would simply find too rude. (He must admit, however, that this is as close as he's come to genuinely laughing in quite some time.)

"It can also impact that world. It—" Kurosawa cuts herself off, a strange look on her face as her eyes stray up towards the second floor walkway.

Then, Will screams.

Kurosawa rushes ahead of all of them, camera clenched in her hands as she leads them back through an office to an adjoining staircase that puts them out in the hallway adjacent to Will's door.

Kurosawa snaps a picture the instant she bursts into the little room. Hannibal shoves past her, bracing a knee on the bed and cautiously reaching out to Will where she's huddled in the corner, eyes wide and horrified, knees pulled up to her chest. She's shuddering uncontrollably, hands clenched in a blanket that seems too thin. (Hannibal feels the hairs on his own arms rise in response to the cold, the skin contracting.)

"What happened?" he demands, hands on her face, her arms, all the flesh he can reach. There's no injury he can find, but she just keeps shaking her head mutely, digging her heels into the mattress to push herself more tightly into the corner.

"It's gone now, Graham-san," Kurosawa says, some sad attempt at a reassuring smile finding its way to her face.

"Never gone," Will mutters, teeth chattering. She's in a cold sweat. "I can feel them. I can feel all of them."

"Will," he says, and she must hear something in his voice that forces her to respond to him, to raise her eyes to the center of his face. The creature that glides just below the surface of his person suit is rising and rising, chafing against the underside of his skin. He'd gladly kill them all, from Crawford to Katz to this woman who knows too much and nothing at all—he'd lay Will out in their blood and feed her the pieces he tore from them until she grew fat from their meat.

(Unfortunately, he'll have to settle for just leaving.)

"Get dressed," he tells her. "We're going back to the hotel."

She nods jerkily, fumbling to obey. The back of her brain can always sense when she's in the presence of a monster, even if she doesn't always notice.

"You need to take her *home*," Kurosawa stresses as soon as they step out and shut the door behind them. They still linger nearby, however, as if a disaster could sneak in if they stray too far.

"Doumo arigatou gozaimashita, Kurosawa-san," Hannibal says, with just enough of a hint of derision to make it clear he's not thankful at all. "For the tea and the . . . *fascinating* conversation. We'll all certainly remember what you've said."

Kurosawa's mouth thins into a line. She gives a deep, stiff bow. "I will . . . call you a taxi, then," she says with reluctance, turning on her heel to go back down into the office.

Crawford rounds on him almost immediately. Hannibal's not surprised, though he'd overestimated the man in thinking he'd at least wait until they were in the car.

"You are being paid to monitor her mental health. She's acting like she's had a psychotic break in there!"

"There had been no worsening of her usual symptoms before we left the US. Perhaps bringing her to a location with a long history of suicide was not the *wisest* choice." Hannibal parrots Jack's own tone of accusation back at him. The skin of his face is being peeled away from the inside, withering his niceties, leaving nothing but bone.

"Or maybe," Crawford counters, outrage building, "you are simply not doing your job in any kind of appropriate, *professional* manner! Maybe you're too *distracted* to!"

"Everything Kurosawa said was so *very* levelheaded and logical. I'm unsurprised an investigator of your . . . *record*—" He twists the word like a knife in Jack's belly, conjuring up Miriam Lass's arm, the mutilated corpses of a dozen Ripper victims. "—would take it as fact."

Katz's eyes go wide, and she trades looks with Zeller and Price, all of them taken aback. (Everyone has a habit of backing down from Uncle Jack, of course, enough for it to be a spectacle when someone doesn't.)

Jack lashes out predictably in response. "Doctors have lost licenses for less," he growls. "I'll be having a long talk with Will when this is over."

Hannibal meets his gaze steadily, unblinking. Let him. He's had a year to chip away at any of the loyalty she ever had for the man.

When the day comes (and it *will* come) that there are no pretenses left between him and Will, they'll kill Crawford together.

.

She's two stories below him, and Hannibal can feel Will under his feet. Sense her breathing, anticipate her unconscious motions and the fall of her hair against her pillow as she shifts in her sleep.

Crawford's not concerned enough to go back to America, because how would that reflect on his department? But he doesn't want his hound wandering off after a hare again, so he's assigned her supervision. Not Hannibal, though—*expressly* not him, as if Crawford was genuinely afraid he'd rape her in her sleep.

Instead, Will was delegated off to Katz, as though that overconfident child could deal with her properly. She led her off to her room chattering, with a large forced smile, and it makes him sneer just as much now as it did in the moment.

His room, though the thermostat is at the same setting, is warmer than it was this morning. He eyes it, then the mirror over the desk. It's square and compact, sitting in a silver and gold frame of Japanese design.

He reaches out and drags the pads of his fingers along the polished surface of the glass, then up through the dust on the frame. He slips one behind to pull it an inch or so from the wall, though he doesn't find anything. He doesn't know what he was expecting to.

He's more tired than he's been in a long time. And he's *dirty*. There's nothing visible on his skin but he can feel a film clinging all along his limbs, under his nails. It's a tacky, repulsive layer that's settled between his clothes and his body, sunk down through the strands of his hair to pull the oil to the surface of his scalp. The water dried, but it left something behind.

He leaves his clothes folded neatly on the desk, though they're beyond saving, and switches on the bathroom light. It flickers, the florescent dimmed to a sickly yellow that casts shadows intermittently into the corners of the room.

He expects a fine mist of silt to slough away in the shower water, but it's clear when it hits the bleach-white enamel. He grits his teeth against the temperature as it falters rapidly from lukewarm down into an unpleasant coldness, even though he's pushed it to the hottest setting.

He scrubs the soap into his skin with more force than necessary to try to counter the cutis anserina. His eyes naturally follow the rivulets of water as they slip down his legs, across the floor. Then they catch on the movement of it circling the drain.

He finds himself musing that there's almost an elegance to it, a purity.

The water. Sliding over him, taking a part of him, slipping away with skin cells and sweat, separating the dead from the live. Joining him with the rest.

(It's so cold. It's *snowing*.)

“Catch her, gaijin!” comes the echo of a nasty little voice in his ears.

The snow is so thick. It pushes back against every movement he makes. Raindrops hit his face, leech the warmth from his skin. (He knows what frostbite feels like.)

The slushy mess rises and rises, and all around him is a wet mist, cloying with the scent of fresh decay and blossoming flowers.

He can barely see her. He’s *losing* her.

“Will you die with me?” she asks. It’s as though her voice is in the mist itself, on every side, and she’s gone. *She’s gone.*

His eyes open and his body jerks. His shoulders hit the wall of the shower, legs asleep and knocking into the bottom where they’re curled unnaturally beneath him. His teeth won’t stop chattering, the water a torrent of icy pinpricks against him.

He doesn’t bother to shut it off.

She’s gone.

It’s a certainty, carved across the surface of his mind. Ringing in his ears. Slipping down the back of his throat.

He doesn’t bother with a jacket or a waistcoat or even a tie—just the bare minimum before he’s in the hall, slamming through the staircase doorway. He takes the steps two at a time.

(When Miriam Lass came into his office, he was amused. What a chess piece Crawford had handed him—not the Queen, of course, because that was Will, but not a pawn, either. Something valuable if used correctly.

And when Crawford himself showed up later, he smiled to himself when the man went and stood in the place his cadet had died in. Twice the experience yet half the intuition. And even as he slid a careful finger over his scalpel just in case, Hannibal felt nothing but a pleased little thrill.

His pulse never rose above its baseline.)

He snarls when he finds the door to Katz’s room open, for all that he already knew it would be. It bangs back into the jamb when he pushes it further aside, and Katz wakes with a jump, head swiveling before her vision even clears.

“Doctor Lecter?” she mumbles, blinking rapidly. “What are you—?”

“She’s gone,” he cuts in sharply. (Perhaps, in this moment, there exist uglier things than discourtesy.)

“W-what?”

“Will is gone.”

Katz pushes away from the desk, stares at the rumpled, empty bed. “No, that’s not—how—?”

“The how is quite clear.”

“I was wide awake!” she insists petulantly.

“As *awake* as you were when I arrived?”

Her face contorts, and in a swift motion, she reaches over and bats a collection of empty Styrofoam cups off the desk at him. They bounce off his abdomen, and he decides that he’s going to *fucking flambé her*.

“I drank enough caffeine to keep me awake *pissing* all night if nothing else! I remember sitting there on my phone on until at least four in the morning!”

He looks away from her as her tirade continues, intending to check the clock. If Katz’s account can at least be trusted up to that point, he could get an accurate estimation of how far Will could’ve gotten.

Except there’s something in the window next to the stand the clock sits on.

For an instant, when he realizes it’s not a reflection, not going to just *go away*, he closes his eyes. Thinks about what he would tell Will to do, if she were in his place.

(*My name is Hannibal Lecter. I don’t know what time it is. I am in a hotel room in Japan.*)

Naturally, it’s even less effective when he knows he never meant it to be particularly effective in the first place.

“—and what the hell are you—?” Katz continues. He feels the rush of air as her hair whips past his face.

He opens his eyes, and finds that nothing’s changed. It’s still there.

It’s *smiling*. Its mouth is too wide for its thin, feminine face, jutting too far up its cheeks to disappear behind long black hair and the brim of a hat.

“What the fuck is that?”

He stiffens, instantly shifting his eyes to take in Katz.

She’s unmoving, shoulders pulled back and arms tight against her sides. Her knees are unconsciously starting to bend, preparing to sprint, but her attention is singularly fixed on the window, face wide open with horror.

She sees it too.

She sees it.

Slowly, something white slides across the glass, through the beaded raindrops. A hand, elongated fingers spread, settles by the face. The arm it's connected to spans the width of the window, narrow as a rail.

And then, the grinning, too-big mouth opens. *And it speaks*.

"What is it saying?" Katz nearly pleads, her voice trembling.

Hannibal swallows. Licks his lips. "'There is no escape.'"

Katz spins and bolts, and she doesn't stop in the hallway. Hannibal follows her, pausing only to slam the door behind him. Except as he does, he sees the hand dig its nails into the carpet, knuckles bending to pull the rest of it inside. The head, the too-long, too-slender body, all crossing through the glass as though there were nothing there.

"You better get used to me," it says, and giggles.

He shuts the door anyway.

When he makes it down to the first floor, he's out of breath. Katz is in the lobby at the reception desk, waving her hands at a startled receptionist. "Taxi!" she shouts. "Ta—takushi! Now!" She slams her hand on the counter to drive the point home.

The receptionist jumps, staring at her in alarm.

"Now!" she all but roars, and the woman finally picks up the phone.

Then Katz rounds on him. "We're going back to Kurosawa. She's the only one who seems to know anything around here and—" Her voice wavers. "She was right. Because if she wasn't, then—then what did we just see?"

Hannibal doesn't argue.

.

The rains have become heavier by the time they reach the village. Neither of them brought an umbrella, so Hannibal stays in the taxi to pay the driver while Katz jumps out and starts pounding on Kurosawa's door.

The windows are all dark, most of the warmth of the storefront absent along with the light. Katz won't be deterred, however, slamming her fist into the door heedless of who she wakes up, and Hannibal is surprised to find the faintest hint of appreciation skirt the edge of his thoughts.

He steps out of the taxi just as the lights flick on. Kurosawa answers the door in a blue nightgown, rubbing her hands over her eyes.

However, she's not surprised to see them. If anything, the look on her face is *resignation*.

"Come in," she says, standing aside. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Will is gone," Katz begins, wild-eyed. "And we saw—*what* we *saw*—!"

"You need to dry off first," says Kurosawa decisively. "For safety's sake. I'll get you some towels. I might even have some purifying embers leftover around here somewhere . . ."

"Did you not hear me?" Katz demands, stalking her into the back hallway.

"I heard you . . ." Kurosawa begins, her voice fading.

Hannibal shakes water droplets off his hands and starts after them. Except when he reaches the middle of the room, he realizes he's not moving anymore. His limbs are too heavy, and he doesn't want to.

The room isn't significant, just a few wisps of color caught in the outmost reaches of his vision. He might've thought to call it disassociation, but no, he is himself. He feels his flesh and his bones, the breathing of the corpse he resides in the abyss of.

There's a picture on the floor at his feet. He can't walk, and he can't talk, but he can lower himself to it. Grab it and cradle it in his hands like a greedy child.

It's the photo Kurosawa took of Will after she screamed. Freshly developed and crisp, every line sharp save one imperfection, a mottled white cloud hanging in the air above the bed.

Will's eyes are huge, her hands wrapped around her arms. She's trying to make herself smaller, disappear off into the corner behind her legs and a veil of damp black hair.

He feels like he could reach out and touch her.

"Will you die with me?" she asks, face turning up to him.

He could eat Will, and he would own her. It's the final and most conclusive power over another human being, to force them to become a part of you in death. It's befitting of pigs.

Only Will isn't a pig. In her meat lies only the barren promise of the life he had before he met her. Never understood. Never *seen*.

But to die with her. To lay down on top of her and let their tissues seep into one another's until there is no space, no difference. Until she's consumed him as he has her.

He smiles. The expression has never felt so genuine.

Yes.

Chapter End Notes

What's my excuse for the wait this time? Well . . . nothing, really. It's been a winter where nobody can get well or stay well, though. We're on about the third or forth rotation of illness throughout my family.

Oh, and Resident Evil 7. Oooohhhh, Resident Evil 7. It took place in Louisiana. You know, where Will's from. Where (s)he might still have distant relations. That make me want to write a sequel to this fic. (just kill me now before i finish the first chapter)

So, Hannibal's sanity is definitely taking a hit. He's having the day from hell, really, and it just doesn't seem to be ending. In his little religion flashback, I had him reference a Lithuanian pilgrimage site, the Hill of Crosses. The Soviets weren't fond of it but apparently the Lithuanians just kept leaving the Crosses there anyway.

If I was ever in a really shitty situation, like say, being consumed by a curse or dating a serial killer, I think I'd want Beverly at my back.

I'll just mention again that this disregards all of season two and three because I've never seen them, as I know some details (like about Miriam) don't match up.

Oh, and Fatal Frame 4 references. Sigh . . . Fatal Frame 4 . . . the hell I went through to play that game . . .

Chapter title comes from the song "Signs" by Bloc Party.

Thanks for comments and kudos!
-Anna

i'm a little unsteady

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I refuse to *calm down* when I just s-saw—saw *Slender Man no Onna*!"

Kurosawa frowns to herself as she turns back to face Beverly, a stack of towels in her hands. "Slender Man?" she asks, eyes darting off to the side as she thinks. Finally, recognition comes to her face. "That American urban legend? The tall man? So you saw *her*?"

She throws a towel around Beverly's hair, strings another around her shoulders. Beverly automatically reaches up to hold them in place, though her brain seems disconnected from her nerves; her thoughts are raw and up out of her body, unable to force her hands to stop shaking.

(She wonders if maybe, maybe this is something a little bit like what Will experiences everyday, when her body's in one place as her mind sinks down into another.)

(She wonders if Will's still alive.)

"I don't entirely know what she is," Kurosawa continues, hesitating a fraction before taking it upon herself to start briskly rubbing the raindrops off of Beverly's arms with a rag. "A spirit that used to be human, twisted unrecognizably by the darkness?"

"You've *seen* her?"

"Yes," she says grimly. "Her clothing, though—and her smile, and the things she says. She's not like any of the other yuurei on the mountain. Perhaps she's an oni."

Beverly finally forces her hands to move, bone butting into the flesh of her fingertips as she digs them down, scrapes the towel across her scalp harder than she needs to. "Oni?"

"It doesn't matter. She's not the force behind what's happening to Graham-san."

"So what *is* happening to her?"

"I told you—"

"*No*, you didn't. You talked in circles and made a lot of vague mentions of things but you didn't really explain anything. I—I'll believe you now, okay? Nobody's going to laugh at you after what we just saw. So just tell it to us straight. *Everything*."

Kurosawa doesn't reply immediately, turning away to go through the drawers of a desk sitting in the corner, cluttered with papers and a stack of small CCTV monitors that currently sit with black screens. Finally, she hits on a matchbook.

Striking one, she fumbles with what looks to be a very small lantern she had pulled down from one of the little office's jam-packed ceiling to floor bookcases.

"Take this," she says as soon as the little holes in the metal surface are glowing with light, making the whole thing look like burnished gold. She shoves it into one of Beverly's hands, actually reaching over to grab her other one and pull it up to wrap around the lantern's side. "This will keep you safe while you dry."

Beverly stares down at the little hints of fire peeking in and out, breathes in a pleasant, ashy smell that reminds her of the scent of autumn. "Why are you so afraid of water? Or—the water around *here*. You said something about it being . . . corrupted, but—"

"I will try to explain, but Doctor Lecter should hear it as well."

For the first time, Beverly looks around the room and realizes that Lecter never actually followed them in. A lot of her thoughts are still back in that hotel, still watching that thing watch them, the grin straining at the edges of its face, the way its tongue lolled in the gaping expanse of its mouth as it spoke.

Beverly's interests have always run to the macabre. It used to worry her parents, in a mild, disappointed way. But that doesn't mean she's a kook. Before anything, she's a scientist, her career built on empirical evidence, the analysis of the real and tangible.

(It's real. It has to be. Lecter saw it, too.

But it's not tangible.)

Kurosawa leads her back the way they came, out into the hall and through the door to the shop floor, but stops in the doorway, one hand coming up to clench the threshold. She hisses something under her breath.

Beverly's eyes dart from one side of the room to the other, stopping at the front door where it hangs half open and swaying in the wind, rainwater splashing in onto the welcome mat when it gaps widely enough. The little bell on the top jingles out of rhythm, slamming into the wood with each jerk of the door.

"Doctor Lecter?" Beverly calls, and even she realizes how stupid it is. But her gaze still goes back and forth, looking in corners and under tables, behind the checkout counter, like he might just be fucking *hiding* for the fun of it. Sure.

Kurosawa walks over to the counter and shakes her head, reaching out to gather up a number of scattered—photographs?

"It's too late," she sighs. "I did warn him . . ."

"Where is he?!" Beverly demands, and yes, panic *might* just be starting to edge in now, because she doesn't know Lecter very well, but at least with him, she wasn't alone. They were both there to see that thing.

"His choice had already been made before Graham-san was even taken. This was inevitable."

“What?! *What* was inevitable?!” She’s not sure she’s ever been this frustrated. “Will you just cut the bullshit and—”

“You have to understand that even living here all my life, a lot is not entirely *clear*. The Miko were secretive and insular, as I told you—no outsiders returned alive. Some stories say Doctor Asou managed to, but if he did, he didn’t leave a surviving record of it. There are no real writings from the Miko themselves left for me to consult, either, if there ever were any in the first place. Shinto isn’t . . . uniform or centralized; it encompasses a lot of . . . traditions that vary from village to village. Here, they all center around the mountain. You saw the top of it. It’s a jarring transition, isn’t it? Lush and wet, then so abruptly *not*. It was believed that that topmost point was an entrance to Yomi. The realm of the dead.”

Beverly watches her close the front door, lock it, mumble a prayer under her breath. “I’ll take a wild guess that we’re not talking something like *Heaven*.”

“It’s not exactly like the Christian Hell, either. But it isn’t a place of happiness, no. It is . . . impure. Shinto doesn’t really focus on morality like Western religions—instead, the emphasis is about purification, the clean and unclean. The water on Hikamiyama is believed to possess that purity. But Yomi has its own water. And while the Miko didn’t consider death a *bad* thing—just a part of a natural cycle, a return to the water that gives everything life—the water of Yomi has to *stay* in Yomi. It’s of that—that Otherworld, beyond where the living should venture, and for it to pollute the pure water on the mountain would corrupt it.”

“So you mean it’s not haunted just because of that massacre?”

“The Black Water was allowed to overflow because of it. It stopped the rituals the Miko performed to hold it back.” She hesitates. “Tell me, what’s Graham-san’s job? I mean, I know she’s with the FBI. But what does she do, exactly?”

Beverly blinks at the abrupt shift of topic. “She’s a homicide investigator. Well, technically she’s a teacher at Quantico. But Jack uses her for special cases.”

“And how does she solve them?”

“She’s a profiler.”

“So she spends lots of time focusing on how other people think. And they do come to her, those thoughts. Is Lecter-san here to help her cope?”

“He helps on cases, too.”

“But he was hired just to help *her*.”

Beverly’s not sure why she feels a little defensive about this. But in the back of her mind the first conversation she ever had with Will is playing, and she hears herself ask, “*You unstable?*” And yes, Will *is* unstable, but she has sad, kind eyes and seven dogs she cares for like her own children, and so that doesn’t matter, nor is it anyone’s business.

“A Miko would look into the minds of those who came to them to die. All of their deepest secrets would be laid bare, and the person would be comforted that, in their last minutes, their worst burdens were finally able to be shared. But over time, these burdens would pile up on the Miko, until she was filled with so much despair she couldn’t go on. That was when it was time for her final duty.” Kurosawa gives a significant pause, reaching out to lean heavily against the counter.

“Which was?”

“To hold back the Black Water with her sacrifice.”

Beverly can’t help it. She laughs. It’s a bit too high and sounds off to her own ears, but she can’t hold it back, because that is simultaneously one of the most ridiculous and most horrifying things she’s ever heard. It doesn’t even seem *real*, like it could *be* real.

Kurosawa narrows her eyes, but her voice is patient. “Ghosts frequently find themselves trapped in a cycle, reliving their deaths or parts of their lives. Some of the ghosts on Hikami want to continue the rituals. They want to purify the mountain of the Black Water. All of these missing girls, any of them who didn’t commit suicide—*that’s* what happened to them. But none of them have been . . . what’s needed. Not *enough* of what’s needed to have any effect.”

Beverly’s laugh tapers off, catching sickly in her throat at a conclusion that suddenly doesn’t seem funny at all. “But Will is.”

“I think she might be. But even if she isn’t, the ghosts have taken notice of her. That’s why it’s so dangerous to look for anyone who’s been spirited away—because something is looking back at you.”

“And Lecter? Why the hell are they interested in him?”

“That’s the wrong way around. It’s because *he’s* interested in *her*. The groom always chooses the bride.”

“*What*?”

“It was thought that a Miko’s sacrifice would—would have more impact, would last longer, if she didn’t have to endure it alone.”

“Are you telling me they’re going to kill *both* of them so that they can be—together in death or something?!”

“In a way,” Kurosawa says, but Beverly isn’t listening anymore, she’s heard enough. Her phone’s in her hand, finger banging on numbers.

Jack sounds weirdly groggy when he answers. Somewhere in the far back of her mind, she wonders if he’s on sleeping pills. “Will’s gone. And Lecter’s gone. He was with me, but now he’s not. You’ve gotta get Price and Zeller and get to Kurosawa’s shop.”

He doesn't respond as quickly as he would normally. Jack, always opinionated, always with a word to say—but maybe a part of him thinks he's dreaming, or maybe she's rambling more than she realizes, not coherent enough to pierce that sleepy fog that hangs around for a while after waking. "What do you mean, she's gone?" he finally says, accusation creeping into his voice. "You were watching her. She was in your room."

"I fell asleep," she grits out, and oh, she knows she's going to catch hell for that, but it doesn't matter right now. "But there's something more at work here, Jack. It's just like Kurosawa said. Me and Lecter *saw* it, we both did!" Her voice goes a little higher, hitches. "And now he's gone, too. They're both on the mountain, we have to go *look* for them—"

"You 'saw it'? What—"

"It doesn't matter!" She's started shouting at some point without her realizing it. Yeah, he's her boss, but right now, she'd slap him across the face if it would just get him *moving*. "Just get to Kurosawa's shop as soon as you can. I'll explain more then. Hurry!"

She jabs her thumb into the disconnect button without waiting for a reply, practically slams the phone down to the counter in her building, barely-restrained *panic*. Then her vision narrows and focuses at the fixed point below her, and her hands jerk from the counter practically of their own accord.

The developed photographs Kurosawa took on the mountain are . . . not of what Beverly saw. The locations, yes, she can pick those out of the backgrounds of each one, but the white, unnatural figures, the grasping limbs and blank faces, the washed-out, almost moonlit glow extending from their wispy bodies into auras around them—those weren't there.

The photo right beside her phone is of the pool, that beautiful little pool with the waterfall and the lanterns that she'd thought was so nice, except there's a mass of bodies in it, all of them tangled up in a pile like discarded trash. Limp hands and gaping mouths and gouged-out eyes.

(And as her gaze moves from figure to figure, part of Beverly thinks she finally understands a little of what Will means whenever she talks about creating beauty from death, about the Ripper's pathological desire to elevate flesh and blood to something more, to an art that could never be achieved in life.)

Well. Kurosawa did tell them the camera could see things not visible to the naked eye. Beverly could almost laugh again.

Instead she makes a beeline over to the door marked with a kanji she thinks she recognizes from her travel book. She doesn't know the Japanese word, but she's pretty sure it means *restroom*.

The tiny space beyond is barely big enough to turn around in, and she thinks fleetingly of all the things she read about Japan in the brief time she had after finding out about the case there —micro-mini apartments in downtown Tokyo, and hotels that are just mattresses, and wasn't it all just so weird and so, so *cute*?

She splashes some cold tap water on her face. Threads her fingers into the hair at the crown of her head, then tugs harshly as she pulls them down.

She lost Will. Fucking *lost* her.

Hell, she even lost *Lecter*. What good is she when she can't even keep track of a grown man who was two feet behind her?

(~~If~~) When they die, she'll never be able to come back from it. Jack'll see to that. He's put all his eggs in one basket and now it's gone forever and the Ripper might even send her a little thank you card, a sounder of three corpses strung up outside her apartment with flowers shoved down their throats and spilling out of their mouths. Because Jack's been grooming Will like a prized hound dog ever since Minnesota, breaking and splintering and sanding away at her until her mind's cracked and fallen into a tailspin, hurtling towards the Ripper's headspace. She's so close now.

But she'll never get there. And maybe the Ripper *won't* actually thank her for that, because he likes to take them on as they come, doesn't he? She's heard of Miriam Lass. And now she's ruined his game, stolen his kill from him. Slaughtered his *prized lamb*.

Maybe she should just end it now, before Jack and the Ripper can take their turns. Before she ends up as crime scene photos plastered across Lounds's blog and thrown up on the wall to teach classes by Will's successor at Quantico.

She could cut her own throat right here. Save herself the pain. It would be a *good death*.

"*Me wo mite*," a voice whispers, sweet and gentle as sinking down into warm water. And Beverly doesn't speak Japanese, but somehow the meaning goes beyond just *words*, and she understands. She understands. But she can't obey, because the face in the mirror doesn't have eyes that she can meet, a piece of cloth draped over them and blood oozing out beneath it, down colorless cheeks.

Beverly gasps, and finally consciously realizes just how hard it's become to breathe. It's like she's fighting to tread water, to reach up above the surface and wrap her hands around the understanding that Will isn't dead yet, and Lecter isn't dead yet, and she *doesn't want to die, either*.

She exhales in choppy white puffs that fog the mirror, and when she staggers back into the wall, *cold* shoots through her like needles in each nerve. *Door handle*, she thinks in a type of uncontrollable hysteria she's never experienced before, not her first day at the academy, not the first time on the job she found herself in a situation a tech wasn't supposed to be in, not even when she and Lecter stood in a hotel room watching an impossible thing watch them with a knowing, *intelligent* smile.

(Her arm won't move. There are fingers around her wrist.)

"*Me wo mite*." She can *feel* the words, *feel* lips just skirt the outer shell of her ear.

"*No*!" she finally, *finally* manages, the word torn jaggedly out of her chest. There are so many more running though her mind, so many and so quickly she can't land on any single one. She can't even draw in enough air to scream.

Then the door opens.

"Katz-san?" Kurosawa asks. A camera shutter snaps open and shut—once, twice—and then Beverly is falling forward into the sink. Her arms can finally move just enough to catch her and her chest is looser, lungs able to fill up all the way.

After a second, her breath doesn't fog anymore. But she's not much warmer. The cold has settled in her skin and she thinks that if she let herself, she could just start shaking and never stop.

Instead, she bites the inside of her cheek hard enough that it bleeds and staggers out into the shop, reaching back to shut the door behind her with a sharp snick.

". . . We probably should stay together from now on," Kurosawa says. It could almost be disgusting, how calm she is.

But Beverly is busy listening to the rush of blood in her ears, the rasp of oxygen in her chest. She doesn't want to die. She's *never* wanted to die.

But something, *something* had seeped down into her, or—or *grown* inside of her, so seamlessly and naturally she hadn't even noticed. And for a minute, she really *had* wanted to.

Kurosawa touches her feather-light on the arm to guide her over to a seat at one of the small tables pushed up against the wall, and Beverly lets her, but on the way, she reaches out to the counter to snag the little lantern she'd been given earlier. It's still burning, and as Beverly sinks, *falls*, to a chair, she cradles it closer than she had before.

Kurosawa sets a cup of coffee down in front of her, then takes a seat opposite. She nurses her own mug, watching her over the rim as she breathes in steam.

"Sometimes I think taking a moment to drink something warm can . . ." She trails off, frowns, looks into her cup.

Beverly's eyebrows scrunch together, though she doesn't take her eyes off the flame flickering unsteadily behind the holes in the metal. She presses her palms into them until it hurts.

I'll watch her, Jack, she'd said, just hours ago. Said it before he could volunteer her. Things had already been enough of a mess, but it hadn't been a big deal to her, since Lecter couldn't play minder anymore. Since Jack wouldn't *let* him.

And that—it doesn't quite make her laugh, but she does snort, and grit her teeth, and try to hold back something less within her control. "So Lecter really *does* love Will."

Kurosawa looks sharply back up. "Love?"

“You said it first.”

“I believe I said that he . . . *cares* for her. And he does. And maybe even that’s what he—he *thinks* love is. But . . .” She scrapes her fingernail nervously over the surface of the table, darts her tongue out across her bottom lip. “I think he’s a very complicated man,” she finally settles on. “More than . . . than anyone knows. Even Graham-san. For now.”

Beverly is trying—really is—to be patient. “You just said he took off after her because he —‘chose her’ or whatever—”

“And he did. But no one ever goes to the mountain for love, Katz-san.”

“Yeah, they go to die.”

Kurosawa looks at her then in a way that seems a little . . . sad, or maybe pitying. Either way, Beverly doesn’t like it.

“There are so many things in a mind that can’t be spoken or—or communicated in any physical way. It’s lonely, being in your own mind. So that’s why people go to the mountain. Because you’re not alone. Because you’ll be *understood*.”

Chapter End Notes

Bev's having a bad day.

I'm . . . not at all happy with this chapter. That's really why it's taken so long. It's a lot of just explaining things outright, which is never very interesting. :(

'Me wo mite' (pronounced sort of like 'may oh me-tay') just means 'look into my eyes' or 'look me in the eyes' in Japanese.

The chapter title is from the song "Unsteady", originally by X Ambassadors, but I've been obsessed with the cover by Savannah Outen ever since it was used in that The Crown video on youtube.

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos, and as always, I'm sorry for how long it's been since the last update.

-Anna

the girl, she's hiding horns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It occurs to Will—so faintly, like a shadow only just peeking through damp, wispy mist that's rolled softly in every direction—that she doesn't speak Japanese. Cajun French, yes—and Doctor Lecter had been so *pleased* by that, sometimes saying a sentence here and there to her apropos of nothing in the smooth, dulcet propriety of genuine Parisian French, words flowing into one another like honey on the tongue in a silk English could never weave, however hard it tried.

It was so refreshing to find someone who could speak it with him again after so long, he told her, the faintest hint of his wistfulness brushing its fingertips across her skin. (It sent a single shiver through her, tingling and thrilled, so unlike the dull heavy weight that settled in her abdomen all of the scant times she'd ever heard him speak his mother tongue.)

She could reply in sentences a little less refined, words roughened after generations in the bayou, a touch of an accent inherent in the dialect that she couldn't drop however she twisted her tongue and tried to emulate his pronunciation. Accents come easily to her—unconsciously, sometimes—but she and those words were both fashioned in humid heat and stagnant water, choked with mosquitoes, thick with algae and the broken shadows cast by what sunlight could slip past the tree leaves.

Watashi is the most neutral way to say I, Lecter had told her, and it can't have been that long ago (can it?). And he's always very neutral when he speaks Japanese—none of the heaviness of Lithuanian, or the nostalgia of French. But she can't understand a word he says.

"It's not right, any of it," says the old woman at her back as she drags the brush through her hair again and again. Some water is wrung out with each stroke, and phantoms of sensation slide down her neck alongside it, a hundred fingertips caressing skin, grasping and pulling at her to come and join them.

"No gaikokujin has ever even set foot in this place before. Much less . . ." She trails off, a hand of spider-leg fingers and broken nails sinking into Will's hair, assessing its texture between thumb and forefinger. "You should've been born here. Maybe then everything would've been *right*. But *nothing's* been right, ever since . . ."

Her hand goes limp. Fingernails bump Will's scalp. And Will feels something gaping and raw, an unhealed wound of failure and terror, but no regret, no—because *we did everything* right*, we did everything, everything, everything—*

"It's been so hard," the old woman says, hands jerking back into motion. Will's hair is tugged, not ungently, as she twists it up, puts a delicate lacquered comb in it to hold it in place. "Ouse . . . well. Finding a husband for her has simply been impossible. She rejects them all."

Shadows move at the edge of Will's vision. One in particular, stirred by the mention of its name. It's been watching all this time.

She has a flower in her hair. Rotted, just like the rest of her.

"I think Ouse is waiting, for one man in particular. The man with the—the device, that could take a portrait. It only took a few seconds. You'd be amazed if you saw it."

Ouse shifts, black lips pressed tightly into each other.

"I understand it more with Shiragiku. Such a strong-willed girl. Stubborn. Not to say she isn't mindful of her duty, but she refuses to be swayed from her own choice. The women of Kagiroiyama choose their husbands, you see, rather than letting themselves be chosen. There's danger in that."

A little red eye peers out from behind the edge of the mirror sitting on the low dresser in front of Will. It doesn't blink.

(*He forgot*, Will doesn't think, doesn't feel, just slips into and chokes in and becomes—*he forgot, he forgot, he forgot, he forgot, he*forgot*he*forgot*he*forgotforgotforgotforgotforgot—)

"Men can't always be expected to keep their promises," the old woman says, sliding a clip crafted into the shape of a butterfly into Will's hair. It's almost the same shade of red as the girl's eye.

"But Ouse . . . Ouse was always so diligent. So obedient. That she should wither this way . . ."

The eye narrows, short, ashen fingers coming up to grip the edge of the mirror as it moves to gaze at Ouse.

The air is thick and damp and makes breathing feel like drowning, and around Ouse it seems to *bend*, contort into patterns of gray that break and reshape in the same way the rot and the filth pulses below her skin.

"On Hikamiyama," the old woman says, and this time she does tug at Will's hair with more force than necessary, "the women are chosen. Ouse's failure to accept this cannot also be yours."

Will is silent for a moment, blinking at her own reflection in the mirror. It's so far away, out of reach behind rivulets of condensation.

"I've already been chosen," she finally says, mouth twisting in unfamiliar ways around words that come so naturally.

Shiragiku scowls. (He forgot. ***He forgot***.)

But Will knows. She feels a stir in the mist. The water that flows continuously and unbroken from rain to lake to waterfall to fog and back again, dissolving and carrying off skin and brain and emotion, has nourished the very ground of the mountain itself, seeped down into

the dirt and become the grass and the plants and the people and everything else until it all just *is*, beyond separation.

And Will feels his footsteps. Measured. Drawing closer. So steady and gentle they barely disturb the night's fresh dew.

(Except maybe they're not the steps of a man. Too delicate. So familiar, in a way she's never been able to articulate, even in her own mind.)

(She couldn't see the killer on the mountain, because there isn't one. And the Ripper, she just. *can't*—)

"Abigail told me," Garret Jacob Hobbs rasps, his mouth sticky with blood, "she told me that deer can walk along without disturbing the ground at all."

Will looks down at him there, curled unnaturally along the floor beside her. His chin is pressed into her arm, nails caught in the fabric of her kimono, fingers twisted like claws in the stiffness of death.

She meets his sightless clouded eyes and for the first time, she doesn't recoil in revulsion, in fear and horror at what he's done. She doesn't even flinch away from her own understanding of *why* he's done what he's done.

His thoughts are there, clearer than they've ever been, a writhing mass of feeling and memory that she peels apart one section at a time, black and yellow pus slipping into the folds of her mind with each new layer.

And when she's done, she just looks at him and thinks: *You sad little man. I'm sorry you thought you had to do that. I'm so sorry.*

"They can walk right beside you and you'll never hear," he says. "But do you see? *Do you see*?"

(The footsteps are so close now. Nearly to the building. The long, elegant stride of a stag, sleek and black as Ouse's hair and leaving no trace in its wake.)

"Yes, Garret," she tells him. "I think I'm finally beginning to."

He smiles. And even though she turns back towards the mirror before he leaves, she doesn't need to watch to know he's gone.

She's not going to see him again.

"Usually we would wait," the old woman sighs, hands coming to rest on Will's shoulders as they both take in the result of her work. "It's too soon for you to become a bride. But there's nothing *correct* about any of this to start with. And you cannot wither like Ouse."

She offers Will a hand, and she uses it to pull herself up. Her legs tingle, weak and giving beneath her, because she's never sat on her knees like that before.

(The feeling is so—so *alive*, rooted deep in the pulsing veins in her body and bringing that stray thought with it, that for half a second, she can almost draw in a breath that isn't choked with water. Can almost, *almost* wonder where she is, and why, and what—)

The woman hands her a piece of stiff fabric, the same pure white as her kimono.

"Put it on," she says, turning to lead her from the room. "It's time to hide your horns from your husband."

Will does as she's told. But there's something welling up from the murky depths at the bottom of her mind, past muck and gore, swept along by black water and the clack of hooves.

Doctor Lecter doesn't want her to hide her horns.

He wants to see *them.*

Chapter End Notes

My out of control language nerd came through at the beginning. I apologize. Though I needed to to give some supernatural explanation for the sudden lack of language barrier.

This was actually meant to be even shorter originally, just a brief check in with Will before she and Hannibal get ULTRA GHOST MARRIED.

So, to make the plot of the game unnecessarily complicated, there's this whole mention in the back story about how Shiragiku and Dr. Asou are actually from the next mountain over, Kagiroi, which does similar things but the shrine maidens choose their husbands instead of vice versa but Shiragiku was 'buried' (so to speak) on Hikami and . . . I don't even know. It's not that important here, anyway.

I should also mention that it seems that a traditional ghost marriage, like what the old woman Wedding Celebrant would want to preside over, took place after the woman was already dead, with the husband marrying her only after her resolve had weakened in her grave. However, there do seem to be exceptions, like between Miku and Mafuyu, so I'm bending the rules for my own devious purposes.

My most recent semester of college was incredibly demanding, so I guess I actually have a valid excuse for being so late this time!

The chapter title comes from the song "Horns" by Bryce Fox.

I truly appreciate all the comments and kudos you've given the story, so thank you all so much! Happy holidays, too!

-Anna

what the water gave me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is an ancient story, originally Chinese, about a red string. The *akai ito*, in Japanese.

Hannibal can no longer remember who first told it to him. Perhaps Murasaki; more likely one of her maids, because he was young and attractive and set to inherit everything of Robertas's.

A string exists between those meant to be together, red as blood. And though circumstance could tangle it, time and place stretch it, it could never break.

Stupid, he'd thought then.

Now he *feels* it—not just around a finger or a wrist or any other single part of himself but his *entirety*, threaded around his psyche and through his chest and down his legs. It binds with such a cutting, agonizing *tightness* that it threatens to *wither* him, cut off the blood flow to every organ, every artery, until he necrotizes from the inside out.

And it tightens with every step, drawing him towards what always had to be. But he'd always sensed that, hadn't he? Just in the way Will has always sensed him, however much she'd sublimated and denied herself, the topmost layers of her consciousness—well-heeled and beaten down by social expectations—suppressing unsavory realities of him in just the same way they always have of herself, all for the sheer fear of it. They say people are afraid of what they don't understand, yet all of Will's fear and shame and self-disgust is rooted in the very fact that she *does*.

It's raining and all around him he feels the whispers of emotion not his own well up and pass from drop to drop like refracted light, run down his skin, gather in the water that reaches to his knees and impedes his movement. Hannibal is always alone—it's the price of his instrument, however heavy, yet the well of foreign sensation and thought is so great that for the first time in his life, he feels the faintest hint of viewpoints not his own.

He's walking through the cemetery and all the dead grooms-to-be, grooms-who-never-were, piled beneath their haphazard grave markers and forgotten, are shrieking. Perhaps they're trying to warn him.

(Pathetic.)

The string contracts around him until he can barely breathe and he finds himself outside a traditional building, nearly shrine-like in its construction. Higanbana lilies bloom on the path to the entrance, their fragile red spider-fingers reaching for him as he approaches. Stone lanterns cast twisting shadows across the ground that flicker in and out of existence like a broken reflection on the surface of a pool.

He slips his shoes off and steps inside, wet feet quiet on a dusty wooden floor of warped, swollen planks. Drops fall from his hair and his clothes but it's too humid for anything to dry, so much so that the pictures lining every available portion of the walls are beginning to rot away in their frames, the red paper talismans bunched around them and hanging from the ceiling rendered almost transparent with dampness.

He walks to the large altar in the center of the room where candles are burning and studies several—most of them drawings, a few photographs, all of them dated. Brides and grooms in their finest attire stand unsmiling, while in the center, above offerings of food and trinkets, is a votive larger than the rest--a generic couple, with bland features and wedding attire one could project anything onto. Even oneself.

A whimper draws his eyes to the furthest corner of the room. Kagura Shinji makes a pitiful sight, huddled in on himself weeping his swollen eyes out into his knees.

"I won't marry her," he manages, voice nearly convulsive. "O—Ouse doesn't want me, I won't, I won't—"

He is irritating, isn't he? He would serve a far more amusing purpose with his death as the method through which his mother and her sister tore themselves apart.

But Hannibal is feeling generous. It is his wedding day, after all.

"Run along home, little boy," he says, smiling when Shinji's skittering little eyes meet his in terrified uncertainty. It can be paralyzing, that type of sheer *terror* for one's life. "Go on. You're not needed here."

The boy pushes himself unsteadily to his feet, back to the wall. There's a half breath of silence between them and then he *bolts*.

Hannibal takes another glance at all of those grim snapshots into times past and continues on, purposeful, through a room suited for formal occasions where transparent faces half slip out from behind screens in the corner of his vision as he passes. He doesn't bother to turn to look at them straight on.

When he reaches an outdoor walkway, bordered on one side by a black pool that doesn't reflect the moon, a figure in a white kimono stands at the opposite end, smiling with decrepit lips.

"We've been expecting you, gaikokujin," she says, offering as much of a bow as her crippled back allows. "You've chosen. Now will you see your bride?" She sweeps her hand out, offering the door beside her.

There's an entryway beyond it, and another set of doors. His heart palpates, the red string pulled so tautly it's ready to snap with the tension; the anticipation of every hunt, every kill, every meal has added to a total of nothing because it was all leading to *this*.

He opens the doors. Will looks up, eyes obscured beneath the edge of her veil.

“Doctor Lecter,” she says. "I've . . . I've been waiting."

He steps towards her because he can’t *not*, takes her in all at once. The shiromuku she’s wearing is wrapped like a corpse’s and such a bright white it almost *sears*, and for just an instant he thinks of how pure and untouched and unstained she is by him, because all this time she’s been looking again and again at something that ultimately twists out of her grasp and slides her away.

And there’s some faint desire he’s never once felt before to spare her, protect her, cradle that madness in his hands and never let it break because she’s precious to him and *it would be best for her*.

But that little desire is so easily ground out to dust beneath his foot, because more than anything, he wants to be precious to her, too, *all* of him.

He falls to his knees beside her, reaches out a trembling hand to touch her. Finally she turns to him fully and smiles, pained—

And for the space between a breath he sees not just what she is but the complete sum of what she can and will ever become, face gaunt in death, blue lips and eyeballs rotting into fluid that leaks down her cheeks to her waterlogged mouth.

Then it’s gone, and she’s breathing and radiant.

He only smiles.

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen anything so beautiful.

.

They each take their sips of sake, and the old woman says words over them. Then it’s done, and she leaves them alone.

Will looks at Doctor Lecter on his knees there beside her in wrinkled pants and a damp shirt, his hair stuck to his scalp with rain. She’s never seen him like this before, but she has seen that look in his eyes occasionally on the rare times she’d met them. She hadn’t known what it meant, because it was all *flat* where Doctor Lecter was concerned, wide and impassible with not so much as a chink to get a foothold in.

But now she recognizes *hunger*, a hunger so vicious and insatiable that it doesn’t belong to a man or a predator but a *monster*. It’s a black hole that devours everything in its way—certainly the victims that crawl behind him with broken fingers and the bleeding stubs of limbs, all of them mutilated in ways she’s read about in case reports and pinned photos of to case boards.

Except the little girl. She cries in the corner with filthy blonde hair in her face, her emaciated frame shaking.

They all disappear as the full force of that hunger is turned on Will. It's always been there, she realizes now. (She would be worried that she never noticed, if she were still capable of that type of thought.)

He pulls her veil off her wet hair, then undoes the kimono and slips it from her shoulders, pushes her to lie back on it beneath him. His kisses are like bites, nearly drawing blood, nearly taking flesh as he presses his lips and his teeth all along her neck, her inner arms, her breasts, the soft vulnerable skin of her face and mouth.

(He wants to *consume* her. Crack open her bones and suck out their marrow.)

She catches his eyes the instant before he pushes his cock into her, though he closes his at the initial slide through into that clinging wet tightness, the give and tear of fragile tissue that hurts her as she stretches around him. Accommodates him.

But then he opens his eyes as he begins thrusting and as she looks into them, she realizes that's what he's *always* wanted—a hole carved in her psyche just for him, where the stag transforms to a man, a *monster* that she sits beside and soothes and accompanies and *accommodates* in all the ways that only she can.

However much he might dress it up in suits and ties and all the finer things in life, layer it down beneath denial and quiet little sadistic coping mechanisms, he *knows* just exactly what he is; and even in spite of all that genuine arrogance, all the pleasure of the kill and consumption, he still hates himself enough that he's thrusting into her like he wants to disappear, cease to be, lose himself entirely in her until he's just another creature in her mind.

He's gripping her hands in a white knuckled hold up above her head and his forehead is pressed to hers, their breath mingling, their eyes locked and unblinking. And she is in a slight bit of pain but it's not her own she's feeling right now, it's *his*, and there's so much, *so much* —

Because he *is* better; he's well assured of that. Better than all the rude, worthless, *stupid* pigs that don't deserve the *food* they eat, that only become worthwhile through sustaining him (*and herherherherher*) but the eating itself is just as much *torture* as it is anything else because in the end, he doesn't deserve it any more than them, not when he—

Doctor Lecter jerks his hips a few final, jagged times, and she feels him so deep inside between her legs and beneath her eyes that it's like he's succeeding, he's crawling inside her and soon there won't be the two of them anymore, just one amalgamation melted into each other in an eternal, spiraling fall.

And then someone will finally understand that beneath all the social niceties and the festering, rotting hatred, he takes every breath knowing he's only alive because he *ate Mischa*.

She presses her lips to his as he finally stills and comes inside her. And he stays there, cradled between her thighs, as he cries silently into her shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

So Hannibal, your mental problems are so intense you need supernatural intervention? Sounds about right. Luckily, now that he's been Glanced, he should be improving. Who knows, maybe he'll get a redemption arc.

The first few sentences of this sat on my computer for about eighteen months, though I basically knew what I wanted to do. Then last night, as quarantine has messed up my sleeping schedule, I wasn't able to sleep and the rest of it just came to me. Somehow I don't think that's a sentence I ever imagined myself typing when I started this story years ago.

Chapter title comes from the song of the same name by Florence + the Machine.

Thanks so much for all the kudos and comments and sorry about the wait! Only about two or three chapters left including an epilogue!

Edit: Oh, yeah, and I thought I should mention that the game lore, if you're not familiar with it, is that the bride shows her corpse-self to the groom, and if he doesn't flinch away, the marriage is successful. If he does, he's buried out in the shitty graveyard with no marriage having taken place.

the guard dog of all your fever dreams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, just to start with, you are telling me," Jack begins, after a long pause, "that you and Doctor Lecter saw a ghost?"

"Yes."

"*Doctor Lecter*. An Ivy League educated physician. He agreed with you, that he saw this ghost?"

Jack hadn't been singing praises of Lecter's qualifications just a couple of hours ago when he'd been muttering about *misconduct*, but fine. "He saw it first! *He translated what it was saying to us*!"

"It spoke to you."

"It *threatened* us."

"And this was after it supposedly kidnapped Will?"

"It's not the Tall Woman who's spirited her away, Crawford-san," says Kurosawa briskly, bustling over with a tray of steaming teacups she distributes among Jack, Zeller, and Price. They're all only half-full, clearly not meant to be sedately enjoyed.

"Oh, right. It's the other ghosts. And then they took Lecter, too."

Kurosawa grips the empty tray to her chest, straightens her back to her full height, and cuts Beverly off when she goes to respond. "With all due respect, Crawford-san, things are occurring that you do not understand. *I* don't even understand them entirely. But nevertheless, they *are* happening, and if you want Graham-san and Doctor Lecter back, you *must* accept what's going on. Otherwise, if you, if *we*, don't act, I *promise* you that you'll never see them again."

"Of course I'm going to do something—they're missing, Beverly should've already contacted the police—"

"And I know the police aren't going to be able to deal with this, Jack!" Beverly snaps. "Do you think—Will is in real danger, and you think I would waste time with this if I didn't *know* it was the truth? That's—that's fucking *insulting*. Not just to me, but to Lecter, too. Do you think he'd wander off la-di-da in the middle of this?"

"I *think* that his unprofessional attachment to Will is becoming crystal clear—for all we know, he went to search for her himself."

Beverly doesn't think she's ever actually once been as offended on anyone else's behalf as she is now. "So you think Lecter's an idiot now? Does he strike you as the outdoorsy type? Why would he—?"

"He told me he hunts."

"Oh, yeah? In the middle of the night, in the dark, in the rain, underdressed, unequipped, on a mountain he doesn't know the lay of? He would have no chance of finding her on his own, and he would've very well known it!"

Jack holds his hands up, finally giving an inch. "Okay, I get it. You have a point. But the next logical conclusion isn't that he was kidnapped by *evil spirits*."

"They're not truly evil—not most of them, at least," Kurosawa insists. "Do they have bad intentions for Graham-san? Yes. But they're simply doing what they think they have to. They couldn't even stop if they wanted to, given their state."

"Because, according to you—or local legend, or whatever you say it is—they think they need to perform some kind of human sacrifice. And they want Will for it."

Kurosawa is usually very mild and polite; not shy, but always patiently agreeable. Now Beverly can see as her face darkens with angry impatience that overrides all of that. "Graham-san's sacrifice would probably successfully purify the mountain. Her power seems impressive, especially given she had no training or even understanding of her own abilities. And with Lecter-san as her companion, the effects could be very long-lasting—the unfortunate things that have plagued this area for hundreds of years would all cease to be. No more suicides. Maybe even your three missing children will come back. And the searches you'll conduct for Graham-san will be much safer for you, but you'll never find her and I suppose you'll always just have to wonder, for the rest of your life, if maybe what I'm saying is true." She meets his eyes defiantly for the first time, narrows her own at him in the small beat of silence before she starts to speak again. "And you already know what that's like, don't you? The wondering. Do you wonder what else that other girl might've done by now if you hadn't sent her off to her death?"

Jack chokes on his ill-timed first sip of tea.

"Of course you do. Especially since you realized that she really is dead. You think it's all your fault. All those things she was, and might've been, and now it's all nothing because of you. Though you're putting Graham-san at that same risk. You know that. But you still justify it because it'd all be worth it so long as you get *him*."

"How do you—?" Jack roars, rising from his seat. "*What the fuck*—?"

Kurosawa doesn't even flinch. "But you'll never catch him without Will." She pauses for a fraction of a second, some strange look come and gone across her face in that same amount of time. "Or without Lecter. So, I think it would be in your interest to damn well listen to what I have to say."

Jack is speechless. He looks unnerved in a way Beverly's never seen before—it makes her think of that old expression, that he feels like *someone just walked over his grave*.

Well. He can join the club, then.

"*How* are you—?" is all he can finally manage.

"The same way as Graham-san. The only difference being you believe what she tells you. Now—" Some of that rush of assertiveness seems to suddenly wash out of her, like she only just now realized what she was doing and is ashamed of it. She gives him a little bow. "I'm asking you to *please* do the same of me."

.

Beverly hates this mountain she's looking at, and that now-familiar path leading up it. For the obvious reasons, of course, but she's also soaked to the bone with freezing rain the tiny lantern in her hands is doing absolutely nothing to stave off, despite whatever power Kurosawa says it has.

Also, Kurosawa had forbidden them from taking umbrellas, saying something about them being "dangerous". How the hell could an umbrella be *dangerous*—?

"I don't have any item or image of Graham-san, so I can't track her the usual way," Kurosawa announces, turning narrow eyes to the stone steps winding upwards in front of them to the broken torii gate. "But I have a very good idea of where she'll be."

"And that is . . .?" asks Price.

"There's a shrine on the top of the mountain. It's where the miko would perform their . . . final duty."

"The . . . human sacrifice? And they're just . . ."

"Please trust me. However intelligent or strong willed Graham-san or Doctor Lecter may normally be, they're not currently in their right minds. Now . . ." She pulls her camera out of its carrying case, flips the shutter open and checks the film. Then, to Beverly's surprise, she pulls another one out of her bag and does the same thing with it.

"You have two?"

"This one actually belongs to Hojo-san. He wanted me to appraise it, but this is an emergency. I'm sure he won't mind if you use it." She holds it out to Beverly, who can only stare at it warily for a second before finally taking it.

"Don't overuse it. That can invite . . . misfortune. But it's also the only defense we have."

"*Defense*?" says Jack. "They're cameras."

"They're *Asou-sensei's* cameras. As I told you, no one knows how he created them, but they not only see into the otherworld of the dead, they *impact* it. They can reveal the unseen and the past—and they very much ward off the spirits. Reduce their power in this world and exorcise them, even if only temporarily. That particular camera, Katz-san, has a shutter function that can take multiple pictures at once, and I've found that it seems to impact the spirits more if you get closer to them."

She huffs. "That seems counterproductive."

"Perhaps, but film is limited." Kurosawa hands a few packs of it to Beverly. "And please, everyone, focus intensely on our purpose here—try not to let your thoughts stray. The miko can be . . . influential on one's mind."

"Influential?" asks Zeller.

"*Detrimental*."

"Oh. Great."

Kurosawa gives them all a final once over before turning sharply on her heel and making for the steps. They all duck under the ruins of the gate and past the rubble, up off onto the dirt path stuck precariously on the side of a sheer drop Beverly can't see the bottom of.

(And now she realizes those screams she heard the first time they came this way really were just that. Not the wind at all.)

The little waterfall that empties into the pool with the lanterns is still just as pretty as it was, the type of place that, anywhere else, would make a fabulous vacation photo, but all Beverly can think about is that one Kurosawa actually took, with the twisted, bleeding bodies only she—or that camera—could see.

And as Beverly stares into the water, she doesn't know why it still—even after everything that had come before it—startles her when a hand shoots up onto the shore, bloated fingers with blackened nails clawing out a hold into the dirt. A second one joins it, then arms, and finally a head breaks through the surface of the pool.

Its hair is smoldering, somehow—burned down to the scalp in places, skin blistered and peeling and largely still alight, flames steadily eating a face covered in complex black strokes of kanji characters Beverly can't read.

One eye is gone, a seeping, bloody void, but the other—it lands on her, and even though the pupil is cloudy with putrefaction, the sheer *malice* in its gaze is like nothing she's never felt before.

"*Minaide*," it growls. "*Minaide, minaide, minaide, minaide minaide minaideminaideminaide —*"

"*We're not looking at you!*" Kurosawa finally shouts, followed immediately by the camera's flash.

And it—*he*—does flinch, and fade until all that's visible of him are the flames. Except it's only a second later that he snaps back, just as vivid as before, and now, standing there with his full body visible, Beverly registers that he's *big*—taller than her, and able to handle the long blade that's appeared in his hand with ease.

He swipes the lit torch in the other at them and they all recoil several steps, even Jack and Price and Zeller. (And a part of Beverly—the part that had worried they maybe wouldn't be able to see anything at all, even if it appeared right beside them—is *glad*. So glad that finally, finally they *see*.)

The ghost's head rotates unnaturally, loose on a neck that's slit to the spine. The vertebrae peek in and out between the edges of his skin as he repeats, "*Minaide, minaide, minaide, minaide, minaide—"*

"Run," says Kurosawa, though she doesn't move to do it herself, standing there with her camera braced up.

Beverly does hesitate. Kurosawa's not a big woman, and though this—*ghost* doesn't have the unnatural proportions of the other one, he would've been sizeable in life.

But even in spite of that, she doesn't have to be told twice.

.

Except, the thing is, fleeing through the dark in a panic on unfamiliar, steep, wet terrain, when Jack is the only one with a flashlight—it doesn't quite work out.

Beverly's foot hits something that instantaneously *gives.* Then all her organs feel like they're trying to come up her throat because *there's no longer any ground under her*.

"Beverly!" comes Zeller's voice through the rush in her ears, but anything else is lost beneath the sound of her own shriek.

The ground isn't *entirely* gone, though—it collides with her back, slips through her fingers as she uselessly tries to slow herself down. Rocks scrape against her nails but she just keeps skidding forward with built up momentum, limbs rolling and straining in their joints. Her awareness is all one rapidly passing blur, nothing coherent she can get from it, but still she thinks she feels her nails break—or maybe that's bones.

But then there's a loud sound, and at all once, she stops.

The jitters of abruptly dissipating momentum linger in her body, all the way up to the fluid cushioning her brain. There's the space of a breath where she doesn't feel anything outside

herself, or even hear—

But then the rushing in her ears turns into the rattling of metal, that distinct sound of the chain links of a fence twanging together.

"I'm—I'm okay," Beverly calls, even though she doesn't know that she is. It just seems like the right thing to do at the moment. At least they'll know she's alive. (But what if she isn't? Would she even be able to tell on this mountain? Can *any* of them tell?)

Her vision clears slowly, and with it comes the pain, welling up in an indistinguishable, muddled wave that she doesn't quite want to assess. She's just a bruise.

The camera Kurosawa just gave her swims into view, lying innocuously only a few inches from her face. It looks to have come out of it in far better shape than Beverly.

Sitting up feels like she's using muscles in her lower back that she should be letting rest for a very long time, but that's not the worst of it. She might, if she's lucky, have ribs that are just bruised rather than broken, but her *fingers*—

The sight of the two longest fingers on her right hand as she reaches for the camera makes her dry heave, draw the hand up tight to her body and look off into the distance so she can focus on anything else, give herself a neutral reprieve as she tries not to let the reality of it overwhelm her.

Unfortunately, what her eyes find beyond the fence has her acutely aware of the cold sweat slipping down the back of her neck, the prickling of her hair at every root.

It's a surprisingly modern street, paved and painted, unlike anything else she's seen here. Her mind flashes back to what she'd read before she'd ever even gotten on the plane to Japan—it seems she's found what's left of the failed '90s development. There's even a phone booth, like a signed testimony of its age.

And by that phone booth, her back to Beverly, is a figure in a white sundress and matching hat. It's slender and feminine and *so unnaturally tall*. Long hair, long limbs, long fingers that twitch as it giggles to itself.

Beverly isn't sure if she'd been gasping in pain before, but she sure as hell isn't now. She grabs the camera with the hand she can bear to look at and somehow manages to pull her legs up into a crouch.

That . . . skinny bitch is easy to see because she's luminescent, both skin and clothes pale with a cold, alien light. But all of the very few streetlights are out, rendering Beverly's immediate range of vision to just a few feet and leaving her to squint at the indistinguishable terrain on the slope beside her for any hint of a foothold. But she's never been much of a hiker, and it all just seems impossibly steep.

She inches along, legs shaking with the strain, stretching the fingers of her good hand out from the camera to snag in the links of the fence and help support whatever tiny bit of weight they can.

Unfortunately, then the fence comes to an end. Beverly lingers at the edge, attached to the tiny bit of camouflage it provides, but a glance back over at the phone booth has her heart skipping a beat.

There isn't anything there anymore.

She realizes she's been biting her tongue, because now she tastes the blood. She'd thought it had been terrifying to have to look at something like that, without taking into consideration how much worse it would be to *not know where it is*.

But she takes a deep breath, steadies herself—

And turns her gaze back ahead to find something standing there.

"*Minaide*," she pleads, her voice just as desperate as the burned man's. Gentler, but to Beverly, every bit as threatening.

It's not the tall, freakish woman-thing, but a girl in a modern white raincoat with a hole through the skull where one of her eyes should be, bone fragments and brain matter stewing in the jagged, too-big remnant of a socket. Her hand grips a red umbrella that droops sadly.

Beverly finally screams, no matter whoever—whatever—might hear.

"*Minaide kudasai*—" The girl takes a step toward her and Beverly raises the camera without any thought, barely letting the shutter snap before she bolts. The pain and weakness from before seem to have vanished in her rush of adrenaline—she can barely even feel her own shortness of breath.

She scrambles up the first area she finds that seems even somewhat doable and *runs*, veritably blind in the dark, clawing her way along whenever she trips. She's back in the forest before long, and the trees seem to close incrementally in on her—branches cutting into exposed skin, ripping at her clothes, towering over her and casting shadows that seem to whisper at the edge of her vision, contort into unnaturally thin faces with that vacant, too wide smile.

So when she finally bursts through into a clearing that isn't just wide and open and *breathable* but also has a building with *light* streaming from its windows, she doesn't even hesitate.

She slams the door shut behind her and falls heavily against it, like she might be able to keep *ghosts* out so long as it stays closed.

She tries to think of Will, rather than focus on how she thinks she can feel the pulsing of her heart in the tissue around her two exposed fingerbones. Except the only thoughts that readily come are all of the woman's offhanded, dark comments that she never seems to notice herself making and her unsettling bloodshot eyes. Her perpetual discomfort. Maybe she's finally found the one place she should—

No. No, she doesn't let herself finish that particular thought. It's just mean on Beverly's part. Will doesn't deserve it, just like she doesn't deserve—certainly *didn't ask for*—any of this.

(God, Beverly just wants to *go home*. She could almost bawl. But those shrine maidens might sense that, isn't that right? Might make her do something. So she can't let herself think that way, however hard it is.)

At first she hadn't realized she'd closed her eyes, until she jerks them back open and finds that the room is suddenly dark. She raises the camera to her chest, braced for something to pop out at her, but it stays quiet and still.

The light source was in the next room over, behind a sliding door that she toes open one centimeter at a time. She doesn't dare get her eyes too close to the opening, but it becomes apparent pretty quickly that the room's empty. Of course, that doesn't explain what put out the fire in the huge hearth in the middle of the floor, which is now sitting with just some scattered orange embers.

There's an altar in the back of the room, talismans nailed to all the walls, and—lanterns, a whole row of them sitting out, all of them fairly similar to what Kurosawa had given her. (That one being somewhere on the side of the mountain now, likely mangled.)

The one she picks up seems like it would be functional enough. She's able to scrape a few embers into it without directly touching them, and even though she doesn't really know what she's doing, a flame sparks up pretty easily.

Of course, then the flames in the hearth reignite as well, for no apparent reason, jumping almost to the ceiling, and she starts violently. It's an incredibly *bright* fire, lighting the area just as well as any number of electric bulbs, to the point her eyes hurt if she even tries to glance at the center of it.

She doesn't wait around to try to find out why that happened, as there's obviously no good cause. Instead she scurries back to the room she came from, very firmly shutting the door that separates them.

She's proven right pretty much immediately. Clanging starts up—the sound of metal dully striking something, the floor, and chanting in what she can only assume is Japanese. The lilt is familiar, at least, as indistinguishable and *off* as the rest of it seems to her. Maybe it's just because she only knows a few words, but still—she doesn't think she wants to know what they're saying.

She tears out the same door she came through, stumbling into ankle-deep water she can't honestly say was there before, and doesn't stop until she hits land that's—that's mildly drier, however soggy the dirt the soles of her shoes sink into is.

"Katz-san!"

Beverly's head whips up, and she's pretty sure she's never been so relieved as she is seeing Kurosawa there a few feet in front of her, concerned and apparently unharmed. Her camera's still gripped tightly in her hands, its strap nearly dragging the ground.

“I’m so glad you’re okay! The others are by the doll shrine. We searched, but—where have you been?!”

Beverly frowns, turning to motion at the building she just ran out of—but nothing’s there. Just mist.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh, was this a boring chapter? I wouldn't blame you if you thought so. But it was never going to be easy for Bev and company to get to the top of the mountain.

Johns Hopkins isn't actually an Ivy League college, but let's just assume Jack doesn't know that for the sake of dialogue. :)

"Minaide" = "don't look [at me]" The first ghost encountered is Kyozo Kururugi, the guy who flipped out when a shrine maiden read his mind and killed all of them, the second is the Tall Woman, and the raincoat ghost is Shizuku Mikomori, a modern woman who had an unfortunate incident with her umbrella.

The fire Beverly found is pretty significant in the mythology of the mountain but that'll be explored slightly more later.

Yeah, Will and Hannibal are still off fucking in sorrow somewhere, but they'll be back in the next chapter. There's also only one chapter left, plus an epilogue. I honestly can't believe I've got this far!

Chapter title's from Fall Out Boy's "Immortals".

Thanks so much for all the kudos and comments!

their voices all resting in your bones

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's about four hundred steps to the reliquary, and Will is very aware of a lot of things.

For the first time, she's truly clear.

Do you see? Garret Jacob Hobbs had asked her again and again, and for the longest time she hadn't known what he'd meant—hadn't even known that she hadn't known. But now she does, now she finally, finally *sees*.

Her bare feet sink deeper into water the further along she goes, until it's crawling up her shins, disappearing her beneath a black surface that eats all. It's always been here, taking lives and emotions and pain, greedily swallowing up a thousand voices and thoughts and rebirthing them into plants and dirt and mist, the very moisture in the air that they breathe in and make a part of their lungs and bloodstreams.

It's endless, a gaping maw, multilayered, agonizing. She's never been less alone, less herself, than she is in this instant. Her edges are poorly defined—she's swollen with so many thoughts and memories and pains that she can't tell where she is, where she *ends*. She's not her but she's not anyone in particular, either—she's everyone who's ever died on this mountain, whether they sunk quietly beneath the water or hung themselves or set themselves on fire because they couldn't take the eyes, the empty sockets still looking. She's a hundred murdered miko and a few survivors who went down the mountain and lived but inevitably came back to die. She's every monster whose work she's looked at, every victim they've taken, all of them writhing with horror and regret, existences left unfinished for the sake of nourishing a thousand different malignancies and paraphilias and fantasies, scar tissue in the brain dug in deep from varied little childhood cruelties or some inborn wrongness inherent in their DNA, their soul.

She's Doctor Lecter. He's walking beside her but he's also inside her and seeping out of her and she's inside him, and of all the screaming in her head, his is the loudest, the nearest. Jack had told her once that he could be her rock but, no, no—it's always been Lecter, even now.

She doesn't know if she'd loved him before. Maybe. Or maybe she'd just *wanted*, without even entirely realizing—wanted to eat him whole and find in his meat and bones the truth of him she'd always known was there but could never put her finger on. The pendulum simply refused to swing, even as the Stag tried again and again to lead her to the truth, drew her out of bed in the middle of the night to walk her there step by step. She just hadn't wanted to know and so she'd fought it with everything she'd had until her own mind turned on her, but all it had really done was feed into a self-destroying loop, a paradox.

She didn't want to love a monster. But she hadn't be able to love him entirely until she'd known what he is.

She never would've thought he would have anything but professional interest in her anyway, a psychological curiosity all his education and clinical experience hadn't covered. But that was when the Stag only came to her in the depths of fever dreams and when she'd looked at Doctor Lecter, all she'd really seen was wealth and polish and everything she wasn't. And he is all of that, except that something deep and fundamental in his brain broke a long time ago, if it was ever even there at all, and what's left is a void, a self-loathing nothing that wants to be something, that's compelled to play out old traumas and inflict them on others again and again like a broken record, even though it'll never be enough. Doctor Lecter is the oily, fathomless intelligence behind a reptile's eyes, a malformed piece of flesh running on compulsion and narcissistic injury and pure sadistic enjoyment.

And he loves her.

He shouldn't be capable of it and it's not healthy, but it's there. She knows now, can see it all so clearly in her mind, how he's been showing it—always that rock, even as he did his best to twist the rest of reality until it broke and he was all she could cling to. That's what love is to him. Because, in the end, she's the only thing he has, too.

No one has ever truly known him before. Not Mischa, not his family, certainly none of the shallow friends he gets far more pleasure from feeding human meat to than in speaking with.

It'll always just be Will.

.

"*Will*!" Beverly screams, the instant she glimpses her. Zeller and Price have been intermittently helping her along, as the shock waxes and wanes, but she breaks free of them and makes to run for her and Lecter where they're only such a short way away. However, Kurosawa immediately grabs her hard by the upper arms and pulls her back into her. Beverly rips herself free, but does hesitate this time, taking in the full scene.

Cast in an unnatural orange light from a sun that shouldn't be in the sky this early in the morning, Will and Lecter walk slowly side by side, tied together with a red rope. Lecter's still wearing what Beverly last saw him in, the most underdressed he's ever been, but Will's in a *kimono*, one such a perfectly pure white she almost glows—almost looks as ghostly as any of the transparent weeping shrine maidens who line the edges of the path the two of them are walking, one that leads to the shore of a lake, and a box.

"The Lake of the Departed," Kurosawa breathes. "The source of all the mountain's water . . ."

Going purely from how they'd gotten here and the rough orientation of their location that she can work out in her head, it must be just a different side of the same lake they'd found Will wading out into earlier. They've all finally reached that Shinto gate she'd been so fixated on, and the ancient waterlogged shrine beyond it, and finally the lake that doesn't even seem to

be a part of reality. It seems to twist in the orange light, partition into squirming strands of black hair that make her nauseous.

“Will!” she tries again. “Doctor Lecter!”

They don’t even twitch in acknowledgement, even when Jack and the others join in. Beverly raises her camera and snaps, snaps, snaps, her finger so hard on the trigger the shutter goes into that special mode Kurosawa had mentioned, fluttering open and closed as it takes burst after burst of photos.

The only effect it has is drawing the attention of a cloaked figure that slowly turns, fathomless black eyes peering out at them from under a dark head veil with delicate gold trim. It brushes past two weeping, blank faced girls that are startling in how solid and corporeal they seem. Beverly realizes distantly that they’re those missing girls, though she can’t even remember their names right now, her mind is racing so fast. Yet still she manages to be so focused on the *thing* that stops only a few feet from her and Kurosawa, unnaturally still, unbreathing.

They almost have a staring contest, Beverly pinned wide eyed in the old hag’s gaze. But she does finally hiss out in a rush, “Give them back.”

The hag says something. Kurosawa translates, haltingly. “You—you shouldn’t mourn for your friend, but . . . rejoice. To become the Grand Pillar is the rarest and greatest honor possible for a miko. Don’t you see how the others . . . weep in joy for her?”

Beverly actually snarls. “I don’t give a fuck, *give her back*!”

Kurosawa hesitates too long and doesn’t translate that, but the old woman still seems to get the gist, pausing and tilting her head before she speaks again.

“She will become an Immortal Flower,” Kurosawa says she says. “Not alive, yet also undying—never withering, never fading. Her youth and beauty will endure as she falls forever in the water, a . . . a vessel for all those she’s glanced. Her heart is too heavy to remain as she is.”

Beverly thinks in an instant of every case they’ve ever been on, of Garret Hobbs and that deranged fuck that rips organs out of people for no good reason, and every single other one in between. She wishes now that she’d—she’d taken Will away from it, or at least just *noticed* how incredibly badly it hurt her.

But she’d always just thought that that was strange, sad little Will. Kind of likeable but odd and creepy and simply *how she is*. She’d even thought the very same thing just a little while ago, in that building that maybe hadn't really been there at all. But now all Beverly has is the acid taste of guilt creeping up the back of her throat, but no, no, no—she’ll change it. She’ll finally do something about it, make it so all Will has to think about ever again is dogs, and no one who’s been fucking dead since before either of them were even born is going to stop her.

“You have *no* right,” she grits out, voice shaking with anger. The tissue around her broken, exposed fingerbones throbs in time with it. “You *bitch*, you don’t know anything about her.

She's not a shrine maiden, she didn't even willingly come to this mountain—"

"The concerns of the living have no bearing on her anymore. She is beyond you. But don't worry for her—her marriage was successful. She won't face the eternal fall alone."

"That is my agent!" Jack finally seems to have found his voice, after all this time. He's been stonily silent after since he saw that first ghost by the pool, drawn into himself—for the first time since she's known him, Beverly had thought he'd even looked *small*. But now his ire's finally come back. "She is *my* responsibility and I will *not* leave her to—"

"It is not your choice. She has accepted her duty."

Beverly can't even exactly articulate what she thinks—that none of the freaks Will's investigated are actually her problem, just like this no good fucking mountain isn't her problem, either, or Lecter's, or *any* of theirs—

She throws her lantern at the old woman in lieu of words. It seems simpler. (And Beverly's never quite experienced this exact type of wordless, frustrated, *terrified* rage before, even though she has come pretty close a few times during this trip from hell. But there's never exactly been something so uncontrollable inside her chest that the only thing she can do try to make it a little better is break something.)

And the woman-ghost-*thing* flinches. Not only that, but the ground beneath her holds the flames that spill out, despite the dirt being so damp it's almost mud, the air so boggy with humidity Beverly can feel it in her lungs, trying to choke her a little more with each breath.

"Where did you get that?" Kurosawa demands, eyes on the shattered remains of the lantern being eaten up by the flames.

"Uh, like a—a house, this building that—"

Kurosawa whips her camera up and takes a picture. The flash is nearly blinding and the old woman screams, jerking away and *blurring*, her edges losing their definition as all her luminescence retreats to her center.

"There are old stories about a kind of sacred fire that could hold back the Black Water," Kurosawa rushes out, so quickly her words slur into each other. "I don't know if that's it, but just *start taking pictures*!"

Beverly raises the camera again, centers the old woman in the viewfinder. The whole scene looks so unreal trapped in that little black box.

She takes the picture.

.

Doctor Lecter's pulse flutters under her fingers where they're splayed across his wrist. All that blood in his veins, all his warmth and his flesh generated from stolen bits of others just as much as the mountain is from its water.

The Chesapeake Ripper had always been formless to her. (*Formless and void*, like half-remembered preachers from her childhood might say. *Formless and void* as a black hole, an underwater lake, always hungry for *moremoremore*.) He was the monster in the back of Jack's head but always the absence in hers, the thing just on the edge of the darkness in all her nightmares.

Now she knows he's none of that. (No serial killer is.) He's just a man, with his pulse beating against her fingers. But maybe that's even scarier, because she can't help her empathy—that her heart bleeds for the boy he was, and for Mischa, and for that sensation scarred into his mind of her meat going down his throat. It just makes it all the worse that he's irredeemable now and nothing will ever be able to change that, even if she gives him all she has.

And she will. It should be sick of her to want that, but for the first time it seems so clear to her how relieving it would be to have someone see that part of her she's ashamed of, and afraid of, the one that's she's futilely tried to smother over and over again, and just *accept* it.

Will never gets the gentle emotions. No one ever lets those go, needs someone to share them with, because they're no burden. It's just not what someone like her was born for.

But Lecter's love is overwhelming. It's a single-minded, cloying focus on her and oh, she could imagine falling with it forever, drawing it around herself until all the pain of life is muted, even though she knows it'll never be truly gone.

That's all any woman who's walked this same path before her has wanted. It's what poor, pathetic Ouse *still* wants, after all this time.

(And it has been a very, *very* long time.)

Will sees her there, a withered flower in amongst the crowd of all the beautiful, crying miko with their glossy hair and pristine kimonos. The Black Water's stained her, eroded her away inside and come up her throat, dripping out past decaying teeth. It's almost all Will can feel when she looks at her—a hatred born from years and years in a dark, wet place, alone with the worst of anyone she's ever glanced, and her own failure, *alone*—

There's a man, very present in her memory. Will only catches a superficial glimpse before Ouse pulls sharply away, bloodshot eyes lowering to the ground, but impressions dart across her mind of the flash of a device that takes portraits and a small smile that Ouse could never return, however much she wanted to; the reignition of emotions she thought had died with her family, things meant only for the living, not someone already as good as dead.

He promised he would come back.

He never did.

And Ouse has drifted, rotting, waiting, alone. There will never be another to share in her suffering.

But somewhere, down at the root of all that pain, is the worst part of it—the knowledge that she's brought it all on herself. That her failure is her own.

She's never truly wanted him to come back. She never wanted to *die* with him.

She wanted to live with him.

.

Beverly fumbles at every latch and button on the camera until her broken fingers bump hard into it and it's all she can do to bite back a scream. "How do I put more film in?!" she gasps out, throat tight.

Kurosawa snatches it out of her hands in exchange for her own camera, and Beverly would've raised it immediately, but Price screams somewhere behind her. She jerks around to find Jack and Zeller pulling him back from another transparent old woman, this one in a pale white kimono with decorations rattling in her hair.

She has Price by the wrist, grip unflinching even when he falls back into the ground, clawing to get away.

Beverly makes for them, but then there's a chill like she's never felt before cutting her down the middle. It's not just a temperature—it feels all at once like she's less than she was before, that something's just so *wrong* deep inside her.

That's when the ghost finishes sliding through her and emerges fully on the other side, turning in a sweeping, unnatural motion to face her. Beverly shrieks, throwing herself back and away so immediately she loses her footing. She still snaps pictures blindly even as she struggles to regain her balance, her breathing and heartrate not evening out even as her warmth starts to come back.

The ghost is thrown backwards when some of the photos hit true, balls of light scattering from her, but two more take her place, and two more after them, until there's so many they've formed a circle around Beverly, all of them floating as though they're already drowned, long black hair and the multilayered folds of drenched clothing billowing out around them.

Flowers, Beverly thinks hysterically. God, she wants to close her eyes, let the camera be the only thing that sees. *They really do look like flowers.*

.

The man next to her killed her predecessor. He strangled her to death with his bare hands in his office and he preserved some of her body parts to torture Jack Crawford, and all the while he never felt a single emotion about it, except the vaguest anticipation of Jack's future pain.

But maybe Miriam Lass was lucky, in a way.

What has Doctor Lecter's love gotten Will? He's worsened her symptoms on purpose because he wants her to break, because he doesn't think she could love him as she is, because he loves her with the overwhelming, sick love of a creature that only understands it in terms of possession and ownership and domination. He only knows how to crush her to him, to hurt her just enough to make it that she'll never be able to go, and that disregard is terrifying.

He's so fucking selfish.

Stop, she could say. (Surely obsession could cut both ways, couldn't it? Be put to use?) *If you want me, if you love me, you'd—you'd—*

No, she knows better than that. Nothing will ever change what he is. But she loves him anyway.

(It disgusts her. But Will has always disgusted herself, in a way.)

Doctor Lecter will keep killing until he's ever physically unable to, and he'll keep feeding her the meat, and if they have children, they'll grow with their father's crimes in her womb, and they might all be little monsters themselves. Or maybe they'll hate her one day—maybe one day, *everyone* will know, and they'll all realize she's exactly what Freddie Lounds says she is.

Because they *will* all be her fault—the ones he takes after this. She'll go to work and catch a hundred others like him and Jack will resent her more and more as she fails to do the one thing he wants her to. And she'll look at Doctor Lecter's crime scenes always carrying with her the horror that she'll be eating this person a little later on.

(Maybe it'll break her.)

She doesn't know what's waiting for them, and that's so much more terrifying than the thought of the long fall into oblivion they're about to take. The nothingness of the reliquary and its water, sitting there at their feet.

(It calls to her. It would be so simple.

So *permanent*.

So *final*, even if it's eternity.)

She knows that she and Doctor—that she and *Hannibal* are going end the same way, one way or another. They're going die together.

And she does want that.

Just not yet.

.

It all stops. Just like that.

The ghosts hover in place above her, silent. Price's screams slowly quiet and the shutter of Kurosawa's camera doesn't click. Even all the shrine maidens have stopped crying, like they're holding unnecessary breath.

The two old women, both the one in black and the one in white, look back to Will and Lecter. Beverly does too and finds that they've stopped at the lip of the box (or is it a *coffin*?) at the end of their path, teetering on the edge. Will stares down into it.

She opens her mouth to scream, to beg her not to—

Will takes a step back. Then another.

"No," she says. "No."

Then, it's like the air thickens. The mist in it expands, and water rushes up at all of them, or sinks down on them, or just *appears* so quickly that Beverly doesn't even have time to realize she's drowning.

.

Beverly's vision fades in, and she's still standing in the same spot. She's drenched and shivering, and her fingers hurt even more than they did, but she can breathe easily. The air doesn't seem nearly as humid.

She blinks. The light in her eyes is much gentler than what it had been, the natural rays of a weak sunrise peeking out over the horizon. It glints on the surface of a lake that still seems too murky, threatening in its stillness, but no longer an unnatural, inky black void.

The ghosts are all gone. Kurosawa's breathing heavily but seems uninjured, her hands still tight around her camera. Those two missing girls are bawling and clinging to each other, hysterical.

(Lavinia and Lisa, that's it. She remembers now.)

Zeller's tugging Price back up by the hand on the side that wasn't grabbed, though if the way Jimmy's shaking the other arm out is any indication, he wasn't hurt that bad. And Jack—

Jack’s looking at Will.

A part of Beverly can’t believe she’s even still here, that she hasn’t been taken away again, maybe this time off to somewhere they’ll never be able to find her.

But she’s right there, and she’s breathing.

Actually, she’s crying.

She sinks to her knees on the shore, right in front of where that black box had been, but it’s gone now along with everything else. She looks out over the water, fingers clawing uselessly at the silt.

“I have to live with it now,” she says, gasping for air between the sobs. She turns and presses her face into Lecter, hands going up around his waist. She bunches the material of his shirt in her fists until her knuckles turn white. “All their pain. Even yours.”

Lecter puts one hand on the back of her neck beneath the collar of her kimono and cards the other through her wet hair.

He doesn’t say anything.

Chapter End Notes

Can't believe there's only an epilogue left.

So a large part of most of the sacrifices in Fatal Frame games are that the sacrifice has no have no will to live. It's not exactly the same thing as being willing, but like the Strangling Ritual in the first game required a girl who had been kept in isolation for ten years to prevent her from developing a connection to the world. The Mt. Hikami sacrifice seems designed with a similar situation in mind, though Ouse got the hots for--who else but--our lovely camera designer, Kunihiko Asou, who took her picture once. That then gave her a connection to the world and ruined her sacrifice.

There are a few nearly direct quotes from related source material in here, so if you recognize it, it's not mine.

Chapter title comes from the song "Ancient Light" by Allman Brown.

Thanks for all the kudos and comments!!!!!

found the place to rest my head

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will gives a little smile at the garland of tiny paper cranes in her hand. Right before they left the hospital that morning, Mitsuko Akabane had offered them to her, blushing, her eyes averted. She'd dragged her socked toes along the cold tile floor for a beat before she finally also handed Will a white envelope, muttering something before rushing back off to her cousin's room.

Agent Graham, Mitsuko's written on the center of it, in handwriting a touch awkward on the Roman lettering. Usually Will dislikes it when anyone calls her 'agent', because she has to correct them, and sometimes that leads to them asking why she isn't one when she's in the field acting like one, and that leads to awkward, fumbling avoidance of the actual reason.

But Will's not crazy, is she? Not entirely, at least. Not like that failed psychiatric screening would've had her believe.

So somehow, it just seems to add to the charm here. (At least Mitsuko's not using *-sama* anymore, thank God.)

"Can you believe she doesn't have a cell phone?" Beverly falls heavily into the seat in front of her, dropping her carryon bag to the floor by her feet. She gingerly adjusts her arm, keeping the hand with the cast tucked into her chest. The surgery had taken hours, and afterward, Beverly had muttered through a haze of strong painkillers that the one English-speaking doctor on staff told her she was lucky she hadn't lost the joints. Then she'd loopily insisted they could all sign her cast as she was in process of passing back out.

(She slept through the night. She was probably the only one of them who did. Sitting there at her bedside all that time staring into the shadows of the room had almost made Will regret declining medical treatment herself, even though she knew very well she wasn't injured.)

"Who doesn't?"

"Kurosawa! How does she run a business with just a landline?"

Will's memories of Kurosawa's shop are very misty, something faint and colorless in the edge of her mind. But the impression that it was small seems right, and certainly not busy.

(Ren Hojo, though—he's still very clear to her, and that nauseous fear of women because he can't be sure if he killed that girl or not. Her little red eyes seem to watch him from the face of each woman he talks to, seeing too much. Seeing through him.)

"I guess she manages," Will says, letting her eyes slip shut.

“Got the number, at least.” Beverly had thrown her arms around Kurosawa before they separated at the airport just a little while ago, insisting they keep in contact as she squeezed the air out of her lungs. Kurosawa had hugged back.

(Will connects easier than anyone, but it’s always one-sided. It’s the price of her instrument, Hannibal might say, and Beverly doesn’t have that problem. And maybe only a few days ago, that familiar feeling of alienation would’ve come to Will as sharp as ever, but it was absent as she watched them.)

“Beverly,” she says, looking up sharply. Katz turns at the waist in her seat, looking fully over her shoulder, and Will tries her best to hold her gaze. She fights against anything that wants to come, so much her fingers crinkle Mitsuko’s letter, because Beverly’s secrets are her own and for *once* Will just wants to think about someone, look at them, without stealing something from them.

She takes a deep breath. “*Thank you*.”

Beverly smiles, wide and gentle. Warmth bleeds into Will’s brain, indistinct. “Anytime. Though, uh, you owe me one.”

“I’m very aware.”

“Get your *husband* to invite me to one of his fancy dinner parties and we’re even. Bloom says they’re legendary, but—can there be fugu?” Beverly giggles a little. Her pupils are still pinpoint from her latest dose of pain pills.

“I’ll make sure there is.”

Beverly’s eyelids start to droop as she settles back into her seat, and Will finally looks back down to the envelope in her hands. *Agent Graham* is surrounded by little pencil doodles and stickers and a few words written in an alphabet she hadn’t been able to read a couple of days ago. Inside is a single sheet of paper.

I really don’t know what to say to you, Agent Graham. I don’t think my English is good enough yet. (Though I’m going to study extra-hard now!) But thank you. I think your eyes were stronger than Shiragiku’s. You even got Shinji and Lavinia-san and Lisa-san back.

That certainly wasn’t thanks to her. It seems like happenstance more than anything else, though the Bureau is certainly pleased with Jack at the moment. It can be rare for even a single victim to be recovered alive, much less four at once.

I . . . hope the boy Shiragiku is waiting for comes back one day, Mitsuko finishes, a stray thought before she signs her name, her email address beneath it.

That boy won’t, of course. Kunihiko Asou died a long time ago, faithless to Shiragiku and Ouse both. But Ren Hojo looks a lot like his ancestor and he’ll be on the mountain soon enough, so maybe Mitsuko’s hope isn’t completely misplaced.

Will feels sorry for him. Kurosawa, too. It's not over for them, like it would've been if Will had just taken that final step and let herself fall. Everything stirring beneath the surface of that dark pool in her mind would've finally been worth something.

But she made her choice. The mountain will keep taking its victims, and Hannibal will keep taking his. It's what she sees for a second as she looks at him—organs and incisions and meat splayed beautifully across fine china plates, paired with a complimentary wine.

He sits down beside her, an empty seat between them, and Will studies his neatly styled hair, the patterns on his suit jacket and waistcoat, the blood red of his tie with its full Windsor knot. It amazes her how she'd never seen it before, that the attention he craves from dressing up and hosting dinner parties is the same as what he wants from leaving corpses humiliated in death and Miriam Lass's hair on Jack's pillow.

(The same kind of attention he wants from her.)

(*Look at me, Will, look at me lookatmelookatme—*)

She wonders how she's going to feel the first night he doesn't come home. What gift he's going to leave for her to find in the morning.

It's going to be horrifying in a way it never quite has been before. She can already see the crime scene photos thrown up on the projector for her classes, hear what she'll tell Jack. *The Ripper's celebrating.*

And Hannibal will bring her the best parts, the nourishing ones; whisper sweetly in her ear as he feeds her.

The baby might develop a taste for it before she's even born.

It's only been a day or so—too early for symptoms, too early for a test, but Will just knows, the same way she knows a lot of things she shouldn't. And of course it's a girl; it's simply the nature of what they are. Will can already feel the death clinging strong around the new life there in her body. It'll always follow her daughter, but the exact form it takes . . . that'll depend on her. Which parent she takes after the most, maybe.

"My dogs aren't living outside," Will says. It breaks the oppressive silence the cabin had fallen into once everyone was seated, nobody looking at each other as the plane taxied.

Now they all look at her, Jack, Price, Zeller, Hannibal, though Beverly keeps dozing in her seat, her cheek pressed into the headrest.

"When I move in," she continues, tilting her face up and meeting Hannibal's gaze.

He nods. "Of course."

She lays her hand on the seat between them, wordlessly asking him to move there. When he does, she lets her head fall onto his shoulder.

"We should get married," he says.

She frowns, glaring at the side of his head. “We already are.”

“Yes, but I doubt the State of Maryland will recognize it.”

Of course. She supposes she wasn't thinking. There’ll still be ghosts where they’re going, just as many as there are here, but there’s the real world, too, and all the little mundanities that come with it, simple moments. Will’s looking forward to those—wanted them just as much as anything else when she was staring into that reliquary.

“Okay, but you’re going to plan the wedding,” she whispers. His hand comes up to cover hers, warm with blood only she can feel.

The rhythm of his breathing lulls her away. He smells like decay and fear and she doesn’t think she’s ever felt safer than she does now, curled around the one monster worse than all the rest. She’s in the darkness, looking out. Untouchable.

And as she sleeps, she feels like she’s weightless, on a long, slow fall through still waters.

.

I can’t think of any greater happiness than to be with you all the time, without interruption, endlessly, even though I feel that here in this world there’s no undisturbed place for our love, neither in the village nor anywhere else; and I dream of a grave, deep and narrow, where we could clasp each other in our arms as with clamps, and I would hide my face in you and you would hide your face in me, and nobody would ever see us anymore.

-Franz Kafka

Chapter End Notes

Hope they don't crash in Hanuda Village on the way home.

I can't believe it's finished. I hadn't started college when I started this, now I'm on the verge of graduating. I got my first job while I wrote this. I acquired eight cats. I moved four times and my mother finally bought a house.

Just . . . I'm pretty emotional I finally got it done after all this time. I am planning a sequel, though!!

Oh, and as an aside, Kunihiko Asou was also engaged to Shiragiku as a child. He REALLY got around, which is also evidenced by the fact that he has about 10000 descendants throughout the Fatal Frame series, Ren Hojo being one of them.

Thank you all so much for the support, kudos, comments, bookmarks, and anything else. It really did contribute to why this is now complete.

The chapter title comes from "Never Let Me Go" by Florence + the Machine.

Thanks again!!!!!!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!